

FINDING FRICTION POINTS

Rethinking the flat earth model of globalization

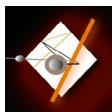
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Keywords. Globalization, Information communication technologies (ICTs), Culture, Genres.

Today, we are continually reminded how information communication technologies (ICTs) level barriers of time and distance to open a newer, flatter geography of global communication. It is the globalization era in which colleagues in different nations can collaborate—in real time—on projects. But as ICTs flatten barriers of physical space, other obstacles have emerged.

These new barriers require individuals to reconsider the flat earth paradigm as one that does not represent a uniformly smooth landscape. Rather, the surface of the modern globe is covered by *friction points*—areas where something can slow or stop the flow of information (St.Amant & Rife, 2010). International organizations thus need to know where friction points occur to avoid them and get information from point to point as quickly and easily as possible. And, in



CONNEXIONS ■ INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL

2013, 1(1), 125–132

ISSN 2325-6044

an economy where rapid information exchange is essential to success, failure to identify and address such friction points can be costly or even damaging (Sakthivel, 2007; Ang & Inkpen, 2008).

Within this context, technical communicators become central figures, for they are at the heart of an organization's information collection, organization, and distribution procedures. Thus, the more technical communicators know about friction points, the more they can contribute value to an organization and secure their positions in these difficult economic times (Giammona, 2004). The key challenge for the technical communicator then becomes identifying friction points affecting international information exchange. Interestingly, these friction points are not random. Rather, they often reflect the physical, cultural, or political settings in which individuals use ICTs (St. Amant & Rife, 2010). All friction points, however, affect the success with which technical communicators can participate in today's global marketplace.

Members of the field therefore need to be aware of the following general friction points affecting global interactions:

- **Hardware design.** Hardware (e.g., computers, servers, or routers) is essential to accessing the online environment and participating in the global economy. Most hardware, however, is developed for certain contexts (e.g., climate-controlled offices) and can be difficult to use in other settings (e.g., non-air-conditioned rooms in a desert climate). In such situations, individuals must often adapt technologies designed for one context to the operating conditions of another (van Reijswoud & de Jager, 2011). Additionally, different technol-

ogy usage patterns and service payment plans can affect how individuals use hardware, like mobile devices, to access the Internet (Kaplan, 2006). These factors all affect how different groups use online media to access and share information globally.

- **Software compatibility.** Software programs are essential to many tasks driving the global information economy. Not all organizations, however, use the same software. Moreover, certain softwares (e.g., proprietary software) can be prohibitively expensive—particularly in emerging economies (St. Amant & Cunningham, 2009). While affordable options (e.g., open-source software) exist, they can be incompatible with the programs used by overseas colleagues or clients and can limit technology-based interactions (St. Amant & Balentine, 2011).
- **Cultural uses.** Not all cultures use a technology in the same way. Social networking software (e.g., LinkedIn or Facebook), for example, is available in many nations, but cultural groups seem to share different kinds of information—and permit different degrees of access to information—when using such technologies (Fogg & Iizawa, 2008; Guo & Yu, 2009). For technical communicators, these differences become friction points affecting how they use such technologies to share information internationally.

- **Genre expectations.** Genres are often central to effective information exchanges, yet cultures can have varying expectations of how to use certain genres and how to present information within a genre (Woolever, 2001). These expectations, moreover, exist apart from media. So, just because one can email a research report to overseas colleagues does not mean those colleagues will view the genre of the report—or the approach used to present information in that report—as effective or credible. While international plain language and corporate reporting initiatives are creating mechanisms for addressing such issues, increased efforts are needed to examine the range of genres associated with professional discourse and information exchange in the global economy (Santema, Hoekert, van de Rijt, & van Oijen, 2005; Godwin, 2009).
- **Legal issues.** The rules stipulating how to treat data can vary from nation to nation (St.Amant, 2008). Such differences involve what is classified as “private” or “sensitive” information, and how that information can be used by whom. They can also involve various perspectives of ownership that govern when copyrighted materials or proprietary data can be replicated, modified, or shared (Constable, Kritikos, & Bayliss, 2011). As technical communicators routinely gather and exchange information for their jobs, such distinctions can create problematic friction in global contexts.

Identifying friction points thus becomes essential to effective participation in the global economy.

To examine such issues, technical communicators can use focused questioning in three general areas—computing, culture, and courts—(the *3Cs categories*) to research prospective sources of friction in global interactions:

1. Computing

- What hardware and software are used to access and exchange information?
- What design, infrastructure, or economic factors might affect uses of hardwares and softwares to communicate?

2. Culture

- Which technologies are used to exchange information? What kinds of information are shared—and with whom—via each technology?
- What genres are used to share information? What is the objective of each of these genres, and what kinds of information must be provided to achieve these objectives?

3. Courts

- How are “ownership” and “proprietary information” defined? What legal guidelines govern how materials and information can be replicated, adapted, or shared?
- How are “privacy” and “sensitive information” defined? What guidelines govern when such information can be shared and how it can be used?

These 3Cs categories/questions allow technical communicators to identify and understand friction points when working in international contexts.

Globalization has flattened many barriers to international interactions. In so doing, it has allowed new issues to come to the forefront. These items create friction points that affect the flow of information across a supposedly flattened earth. By identifying and addressing friction points, technical communicators can enhance communication practices in the modern economy. ■

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