

Book Review

H. A. McKee and J. E. Porter

Professional Communication and Network Interaction: A Rhetorical and Ethical Approach

—Reviewed by

Feature by

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Digital media abound, so technical communicators must continually invent new ways to communicate in these new technologies. They must understand new media and find the most effective ways to use them. Using rhetorical and ethical theory, McKee and Porter analyze the changes to professional communication provoked by technological advancement. Their book offers case studies and analysis to demonstrate approaches to network interactions such as phatic communication, rhetorical interaction, social listening, and artificial-intelligence (AI) agents. They present different approaches and examples, and successfully reveal the rhetorical and ethical implications of communication in electronic networks.

This book is geared toward “business communication scholars, teachers, students, and business practitioners alike” (p. i). It is for any business professional who wants to communicate better and maintain or improve professional communication using social media and new rhetorical and ethical perspectives. The book references historical landmarks of written communication such as the printing press as a pretext for understanding new modes of communicating using new media in emerging communities and fields. Anyone who wants to communicate clearly and effectively within their

network or community would find this book valuable.

This book is divided into two sections. The first details rhetorical and ethical approaches in communication; the second examines four “Cases of Network Interaction.” The first half of the book explains how rhetoric and ethics can be used to help create successful networked communication. The second half recommends how to apply rhetoric and ethics in specific workplace settings. Each chapter contains detailed subheadings and a helpful conclusion summarizing its main points, a feature sure to help students and novices digest the theoretical concepts presented. The summaries will also help readers who must quickly read and understand a specific topic without having to read the book in its entirety.

The introduction uses brief examples to acquaint readers with the interactive, social, viral, public, and fast nature of professional communication in social and digital media. The introduction also proposes an approach to networked communities that intertwines rhetorical and ethical considerations.

The first half of the book, chapters two to four, describes how to maintain and grow networks using the proposed rhetorical and ethical approach. Chapter 2 merges rhetoric and ethics with two concepts: *kairos* (timing and evolving events) and *ethos* (character). They argue that rhetoric and ethics are closely interrelated and overlapping: “[O]ne can’t work without the other” in creating clear communication (p. 43). The authors endorse a sophisticated view of these key concepts over the Aristotelian approach of the Western rhetorical

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tradition. Chapter 3 specifically focuses on *phatic* communication, or two-way communication for the purpose of “maintaining productive relationships” (p. 46). The chapter traces the history of the key concept, and it describes the importance of *phatic* communication in intercultural and transcultural communication, as well as in the “identity and character of the rhetor and of the communication context itself” (p. 61). The fourth chapter details rhetorical interaction in terms of actor-network theory, which “treats technology itself . . . as an active participant” and underscores how interactions spread like a virus over time (p. 83). They argue that knowledge of these dynamics “is fundamental to delivery and essential for rhetorically effective professional communication” (p. 93). The authors note that this theory, in their opinion, is most effective when detailing digital age communication.

Part two (chapters 5 to 7) offers case studies of professional communication and networked interaction in different forms, as well as the book’s conclusion (chapter 8). Chapter 5 illustrates how employees in a media company, a textile mill, and a chocolate company use social media. The authors caution that employees need to “consider when and if they can every really just be a private citizen when posting to public media” (p. 113). The chapter selects timely examples. For example, it recounts the case of Justine Sacco and the actions that her employer took when she posted a racist tweet prior to her trip to Africa. The chapter also recommends that corporations turn crises into “an opportunity to build corporate ethos” (p. 113).

Chapter 6 presents cases of social listening, how organizations monitor what customers say about them. Actions by a restaurant chain illustrate the importance of companies taking a more ethical and

truly friendly approach to communicating with the public:

If a company calls their research social listening . . . that obligates them to listen. If they call customers friends, then that obligates them to behave like one. (p. 133)

Chapter 7 explores AI and the changes that these tools have brought to technical and professional communication. Automated customer service at a hotel chain and chatbots such as Siri and other digital personal assistants show how “communicating with AI agents brings with it different expectations” on the part of the user and consumer (p. 167). Chapter eight concludes the book by emphasizing the need for a new framework for theorizing, practicing, organizing, regulating, and teaching professional communication in networked interactions. The conclusion stresses the need for change to meet communication needs in the digital age.

This book provides a fairly general overview of the main issues influencing communication using digital media and new technology. It offers case studies and key concepts that could be applied to a variety of fields. This book could be used as an introduction to corporate communication across industries. It focuses on a few key rhetorical concepts; therefore, other theories such as postcritical approaches are not considered. This book introduces rhetorical theory applied to real-world cases. Doing so might help a wider range of readers see practical applications for it, even though the book does not offer rules, checklists, or guidelines to follow in networked communication. Nevertheless, the book clearly offers a comprehensible introduction to cases and considerations for professional communication and network interaction.