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Editor's Introduction

Guiseppe Getto
East Carolina University

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East Carolina University, USA

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners of technical and professional communication deal with culture on a daily basis. We are members of an increasingly complex communication infrastructure that is global in scope and that is fueled by the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) within all aspects of our lives. We are citizens of nations around the world that contain their own laws, rules, and customs. We are members of professional fields and academic disciplines that carry with them particular conceptions of knowledge-making, power, and competency. We are also members of organizations, institutions, and communities that we must navigate on a daily basis in order to develop and sustain our individual identities.

Most importantly, perhaps: we are communication and professionalization specialists. We promote our clients, colleagues, and partners through social media, webpage content, and face-to-face social networking. We help people from a variety of walks of life access tight-knit professional networks through education and mentorship. We serve clients ranging from first-generation college students learning basic competency in Standard English to members of multinational corporations seeking to expand to new markets. We work under the auspices of organizations and institutions, which range from non-profits to universities to small businesses to corporations.

One could argue, in fact, that from within our respective niches in the organizations and institutions that employ us, we are purveyors of a large variety of professional cultures. We help people synthesize increasingly complex information into increasingly complicated knowledge-making practices. We help people bridge their home dialects and lifeways with professional identities that feel alien, contradictory, and irrational to almost everyone who first encounters them. We help people transition from customs they are familiar with to customs that must become familiar if stakeholders are to launch careers, serve others, and build new knowledge.

We are, in a phrase: capacity builders. Stemming from the Human Capability Approach (Human), the notion of capacity can be thought of as an act of helping people bridge a variety of contexts. As researchers of technical and professional communication, in other words, we help

people, who naturally experience culture at the individual level, to situate their individual experiences within local, regional, national, and global contexts. We help people gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they require in order to transition from one material, ideological, developmental, and/or economic context to another.

And if we are capacity builders who purvey professional cultures, then one of the most important aspects of our professional missions is *defining and operationalizing culture,* which is the subject of this special issue of *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization.* As I argue below, in order to continue to do the work that we do as researchers, educators, and professionals, we must strive to better understand the increasingly complex lifeways that our work touches upon. And further: we must help other people build these capacities as well.

Four axes for conceptualizing culture: Local, global, technological, cultural

Like many of us in the field of Technical and Professional Communication, I am an empirical researcher. I prefer to investigate communication practices as they are practiced by specific individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions. I find that within the fine-grained details of specific professional cultures, lie the most interesting insights into how and why people do work, develop professional identities, make meaning, and make use of various means of persuasion.

As I write this, I am currently engaged in a research project to help a regional homeless shelter improve its web presence (http://greenvillecommunityshelter.org). By accomplishing this, the staff of the shelter hope to fundraise more effectively. The staff of the shelter want me to help improve their professional culture, in other words. Specifically, they want me to help them improve their capacity to communicate with audiences of funders via web technologies. This project requires me to understand a complex professional culture and my relationship to that culture. Or, in another way, this project requires me to operationalize culture in radically different ways along four axes that I like to use when developing a research project (Getto, 2014): local, global, technological, cultural (see Figure 1, below).
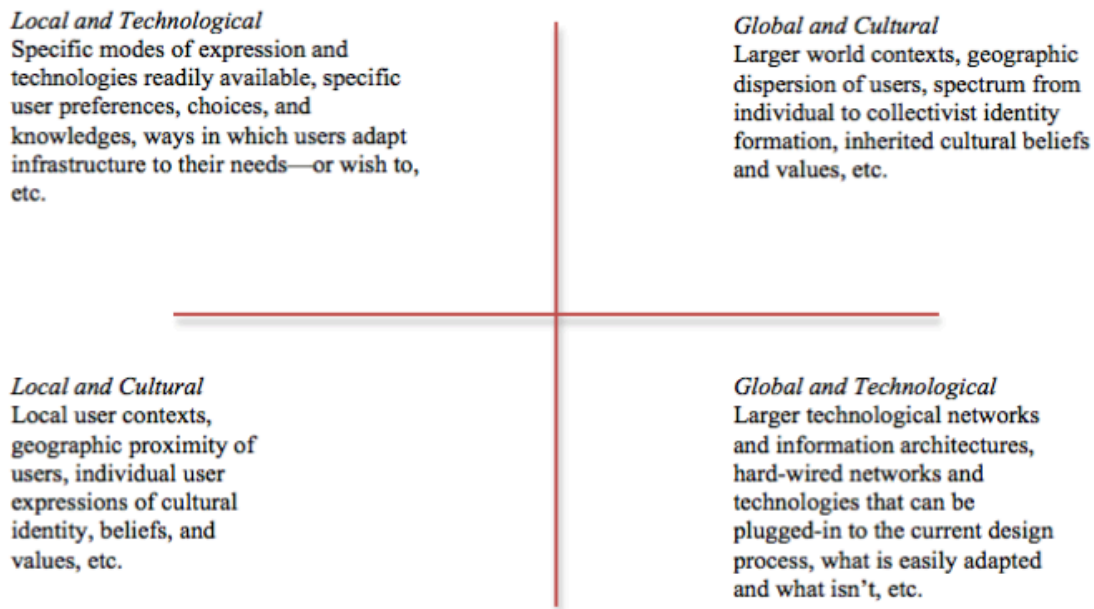
Local and Technological
Specific modes of expression and technologies readily available, specific user preferences, choices, and knowledges, ways in which users adapt infrastructure to their needs—or wish to, etc.

Global and Cultural
Larger world contexts, geographic dispersion of users, spectrum from individual to collectivist identity formation, inherited cultural beliefs and values, etc.

Local and Cultural
Local user contexts, geographic proximity of users, individual user expressions of cultural identity, beliefs, and values, etc.

Global and Technological
Larger technological networks and information architectures, hard-wired networks and technologies that can be plugged-in to the current design process, what is easily adapted and what isn't, etc.

Figure 1. Four axes for operationalizing culture

What I'd like to do now in the rest of this introduction is explore each of these axes in-depth vis-à-vis current literature on the study of culture. I will also continue to tell the story of a professional culture, and how looking at this professional culture along each axis affects our understanding of it. In so doing, I hope to show that these axes are not just useful heuristics for me, but also for other researchers of culture and communication.

At a broader level, however, I am obviously breaking a bit with scholarly conventions in this introduction. My goal in doing so is to present tensions in literature on the study of culture as *capacities for building new models for defining and operationalizing culture*. As technical and professional communication researchers and practitioners, we naturally occupy professional and cultural positions that are wrought with tension. In a similar way, instead of occupying one theoretical position on the concept of culture, perhaps we should seek to occupy multiple positions. Perhaps we should use tensions between different definitions of culture as an impetus to build new research models. Rather than avoiding theoretical tensions, these new models should embrace them.

Local and cultural

Several scholars have argued that culture is too ephemeral, contested, dynamic, and complex to theorize beyond the local level and that the very act of theorizing beyond the local is a colonizing move (Villanueva, 1999; Powell, 2002; Mao, 2006). Let me muddy the waters a bit in our developing story of a professional culture to show why consideration of this position is important. Some backstory is that I had already built the homeless shelter a new website during an earlier project, but realized that it didn't quite fit their organizational culture, and offered to redesign it. Hopefully this new plot point has changed the way you think of this professional

culture and my relationship with it. This new explanation makes my relationship to the project much less cut-and-dry. It is hard to know what is ethical now that we know more about it. The situation is much more dynamic and contested when we look at it with a closer lens.

This new information raises a variety of questions along the local and cultural axis:

1. *Local user contexts* – What does it mean to consult with an organization if I caused the original problem with their website? Should I have waited before designing the first instance of the site? Probably, but how could I have known that, except in retrospect?
2. *Individual user expressions of cultural identity, beliefs, and values* – What does it mean to attempt to represent an entire organization and their attendant goals through one specific communication medium? Especially an organization that represents people who are severely disempowered?
3. *Geographic proximity of users* – What does it mean to design a website for a "regional homeless shelter"? How can a specific building located in one place and time be at the same time "regional"? Where does the local end and the regional begin?

In this project, I am faced with multiple, conflicting conceptions of professional culture and my relationship with that culture.

Rather than dispense with these questions in favor of another theoretical position more suitable to the project, however, these were the actual questions I asked myself when I realized my mistake regarding the original design. I had to think my way through these tensions, in other words, to avoid another mistake. And these were useful questions for me to consider. Local and cultural issues like those above obviously impact our work as technical and professional communicators, and deserve an important seat at our theoretical table. In keeping with my argument: they are important theoretical capacities to consider.

Global and cultural

As a variety of scholars have argued, there are critical limitations to the local approach for global inquiry, including ethnocentrism, validity of comparative constructs, and ethics. Such scholars often position their definition of culture on the assumption that culture is an individual's construction of reality that is imposed onto groups of people due to that individual's subjective experiences in relation to the cultural ecology, even in a globalized, multicultural world (Chiu, 2010, Wan, 2012; Wan & Chiu, 2009). This definition faces theoretical and methodological problems, however, when facing the significant evidence that cultural behavior also resides in more than the individual level and includes global-level influence such as information technologies and development.

Some scholars prefer to theorize culture at the level of nation states and broad regions of the world (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; House, et al, 2004; Hofstede, 2010). As a variety of scholars have maintained, this approach is so broad that it does not allow scholars to ground communication in regional or even professional genres. It doesn't account for concrete facets of a developing global culture, such as impacts on business and trade, the proliferation of

information and communication technologies, and trends in entertainment, immigration, and politics.

Let's continue our story of a professional culture to see why these two positions also deserve some merit. As I approached the homeless shelter about my mistake and the possibility of a redesign, I realized I was also going to be teaching a service-learning class on the topic of business writing the semester directly following the redesign. In talking to the shelter, I also realized that part of my mistake lay in my understanding of the "regional" quality of the shelter. Though the shelter includes in its name the title of the city in which it resides—Greenville—it is not supported in any way by this city, and currently has residents from several states away.

Let's see some of the issues these new plot points raise:

1. *Larger world contexts* – How far does the influence of this brick and mortar shelter reach? How far can this influence be extended via a communication technology technically global in scope?
2. *Geographic dispersion of users* – How can I signal that the shelter is located in a specific geographic location, but serves a much larger region? How can a simple website account for this dispersion of users?
3. *Spectrum from individual to collectivist identity formation* – Is there a way to fold a service-learning class on business writing into this kind of project? How does this change the intersubjective nature of the project? What is the best way to include students in the negotiation of a knotty communication problem involving different layers of stakeholders and technologies?
4. *Inherited cultural beliefs and values* – Why had the shelter chosen to name itself after the city it resides in, if this city isn't supporting it? Is this causing a mismatch between the expectations of funders and the reality of the organization's financial situation? What are my responsibilities as a professional communicator to help the organization remedy this potential mismatch?

Once again we see some empirical evidence that this professional culture benefits from looking at it with a more global lens. Productive and compelling questions are raised when we do so.

There has to be at least one reader of this introduction who feels that I am being far too facile with these tensions. If there is merit in all these positions, then why define culture at all? Why not say that everything is "cultural" or that culture is part of everything? And to this I respond that *definitions do matter*, but that *perhaps they matter in different ways.*
So far we have seen three valid perspectives of a professional culture: essentially local, meso, and global perspectives. Would it be theoretically sound to say that our example professional culture is definitively not local? Or definitively not global? Or definitively not impacting, and being impacted by, local contexts? Or definitively not impacting, and being impacted by, global contexts? Certainly not. And if this professional cultural is both local and global, then we simply must ask ourselves as researchers: *which aspects are most important for the present inquiry*? Which aspects are most important to ourselves and to our stakeholders for each particular project? Let me elaborate on that more below.

Local and technological

Another group of scholars have claimed that specific cultures radically differ in their implementations of technologies, and that technology is thus now key to the ways in which culture is both represented and lived (St.Amant, 2002; van Reijsowould & de Jager 2011; Sun, 2012). This position holds that cultural perceptions impact technologies so dramatically, in fact, that the same technology will have completely different relevancy from culture to culture. It also holds that technology is now a key lens through which people understand and access culture. Critics of this position claim that it is difficult to operationalize these theories, because if perception is so important, then it becomes difficult to separate the acts of perception necessary in research from the messiness of cultural expectations. If all technology is embedded within patterns of cultural relevancy, in other words, then no technology—or research method seeking to assist technological development—can be useful outside of a heavily localized context.

Let's check in with our example professional culture to see what this position lends to our perception of it. What taught me that the homeless shelter needed a different website was actually their use of the first one. I had designed the original site using the open source technology WordPress and some custom code. I had then documented how to update the site, in hopes that the site could be sustained by the organization without my intervention. This was partially because I think WordPress is a fairly usable technology for people who aren't very familiar with web design. It was also because when I had first encountered the shelter through a mutual acquaintance, they had hired a web designer who had started a website using WordPress and then had abandoned the project. The situation was also complicated by the fact that some of the staff of the organization had logged into the site to attempt to finish the original WordPress design.

This situation brought up a lot of interesting questions:

1. *Specific modes of expression and technologies readily available* – Obviously WordPress seemed like a good choice for the organization given that a haphazard installation of it was already in place, but were there other technologies that should be considered?
2. *Specific user preferences, choices, and knowledges* – What had enabled the staff who had managed to change certain elements of the site to do so? Was there some hidden capacity present within the organization? Would some enterprising young designers be joining my class that could help with the redesign if I just waited for the semester to start?
3. *Ways in which users adapt infrastructure to their needs, or wish to* – What had gone wrong in the original project? Why had it failed? What goals was the original designer unable to fulfill and why?

These were all issues worthy of consideration. After all, should the organization decide to redesign the first site, maybe they would attempt to do so with my design as well. Maybe I

should attempt to teach them enough elements of web design to be entirely self-sufficient and not have to rely on consultants at all.

Once again, it seems important to have considered at least some of these issues. To return to my earlier point: I say *some* because as I write this introduction, I realize that many of these considerations, replicated from notes I took as I moved through the project, fell by the wayside as conversations with the staff of the homeless shelter introduced new exigencies, goals, and values. After not being able to answer many of these questions, I did what every good consultant does and laid out many of these considerations for the staff and let them decide. I let their expectations drive the process.

It may seem here that I am advocating the local and technological as the most important position, and perhaps it was in this particular project. Does that make it the most important consideration, period? Again, I find that kind of reduction theoretically untenable. Had events played out differently, perhaps another cultural element would have become the determining factor. And, as I explain more below, it is probably more accurate to say that other elements of this professional culture hinged on this one, not that they were unimportant or somehow irrelevant. They were simply less relevant for this specific project and its interaction with a specific professional culture.

Global and technological

A fourth group of scholars stake their claims at a large and technologically-embedded scale of culture. These thinkers claim that the pervasiveness of ICTs has created a new social order that affects human cultural capacity at a massive scale (Yunker, 2003; Castells, 2010; Ghemawat, 2011). They resist any reduction to the local and see technology as one of the main driving factors in the evolution of human societies. Critics of this position claim that these large-scale conceptions of technocultures are painted with too broad of a brush to be meaningful to specific individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions. There is a version of technoculture that also becomes strongly deterministic, in which the only meaningful human agency is a technological one. People in developing regions who often suffer from lack of access to at least some cutting edge technologies are then left without agency unless they can acquire sufficient technological capital to join global technocultures.

Nonetheless, some of these larger factors definitely affected our example professional culture. Though the capacity for tinkering with complex technologies that I had detected earlier in the project was definitely present, my next move in the project would turn out to be a mistake. Overestimating this capacity, I backed away from the shelter after designing my first instance of their new site, hoping they could sustain the site on their own without my help. Though they were able to maintain the site at a minimal level, they clearly struggled to update new events in a systematic manner, to respond to user comments, and to keep the site in good working order. I had also discussed the possibility of a service-learning project with the organization, but didn't want to send students into a complicated situation that I, myself, was uncertain of.

This finding brought up the following questions:

1. *Larger technological networks and information architectures* – Is it possible for the organization to maintain a site on their own? If not, what did that mean for the sustainability of their web presence outside of my intervention?
2. *Hard-wired networks and technologies that can be plugged in to the current design process* – What technologies could students safely use to add to the capacity of the organization without complicating an already complex communication situation?
3. *What is easily adapted and what isn't* – Had my first design been too complicated for the organization's current technological capacity? What could be simplified to allow for a more sustainable design?

There were clearly larger technological affordances at work that needed to be considered, in other words.

Though I stand by my earlier assertion—that the most important issues in this project were local and technological—global and technological considerations clearly affected the project. More importantly, perhaps, I hope it is clear at this point why I go through *all these axes* for every research project I develop: it is possible for any of them to matter. A lot. It is only by thinking through all the *possible* conceptions of culture that I am able to ascertain which conceptions of culture matter most in a given project. And though I don't recall a project in which all these axes—local, global, technological, cultural—were equally important, I also don't recall a project where I could ascertain which axes were most important without first considering all of them.

As far as the story of our example professional culture is concerned, it is still unfolding. In consultation with the staff of the homeless shelter, I developed a service-learning project in which students improved the organization's social media presence while I continued with a redesign, but more slowly this time. What I had learned from this particular professional culture is that they needed more time to adapt to the new capacities I was introducing them to. I decided to do a phased design project over a series of months that would involve training staff in the operation of the new site I was building with them.

I had realized that the tensions I had experienced were not problems of capacity, but problems of time, in other words. The staff of the homeless shelter needed time to develop the capacities I was introducing to them. This was a highly situated notion of time, though. What I thought was crystal clear after a brief explanation needed to be laid out over a series of encounters. This tension between my expectations and theirs is a classic instance of the cultural relevancy of technology.

That's what I like about this methodology, you see: it reminds me to inhabit tensions. Tensions between local and global. Tensions between technology and culture. Tensions between contexts. Tensions between people. It is my experience that capacities are also developed in tension. They are an attempt to stretch beyond what you can already do.

So…where does that leave us? Articles in this special issue

Like this introduction, this special issue of *Rhetoric, Globalization, and Professional Communication* will not settle debates surrounding how to define and operationalize culture once

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and for all. The authors featured in this issue are not advancing conceptions of culture that are definitive, meaning finalized for good. The authors are not proposing hard-and-fast solutions to age old dilemmas fueled most often by disciplinary fault lines and ego rather than solid research.

What they *are* doing is showing us new models for defining and operationalizing culture so that we can better account for it as researchers. They are showing us how researchers purvey professional culture, in other words, or how researchers can help other people build professional and cultural capacities. In this special issue, you will read about translocal pragmatics, or a methodology for fostering international cooperation without relying too much on nationality and proximity (Mara & Verzella). You will also read about intercultural connectivism, or a means of viewing intercultural learning situations as occurring across networked connections (Duin & Moses). You will encounter a blended interpretive approach (BIA) to intercultural theory, an expansive theory for collapsing the etic/emic divide (Ray). You will learn how design cards can be used to fuel cross-cultural design processes through operationalizing culture (Sun), how to uncover complex motives in intercultural situations (Mattson), why the Bologna Process is an intriguing model of layered definitions of culture (Martinez), and how a cultural movement can be both local and contingently universal (Franklin).

A wonderful collection of theoretical objects as dissimilar as the professional cultures they represent. And yet connections are apparent. Translocal pragmatism echoes of intercultural connectivism in their dual commitments to boldly bridging contexts and methods. BIA smacks of a contingent universality. All compelling instances of innovative new thinking about professionalism, culture, and their malcontents. Happy reading.

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