# [SLIDE 1][[1]](#endnote-1) Culture and Power in Digitally Mediated Intercultural Rhetorical Encounters

## Introduction

Good afternoon! Thank you for joining us. Today I’d like to discuss some findings from a qualitative research project I conducted recently. I have been interested in the intersection of everydayprofessional rhetorical work, digital mediation of that work, and the way “culture” flows through, impacts, mediates *or doesn’t* mediate that day-to-day work. I’d like to share with you a project I worked on recently at a multilingual, multinational company that has an administrative office in El Paso, TX on the US-Mexico border, a factory in Juarez, MX, and customers throughout the US. From the various interviews, observations, and artifacts collected during my ethnographic work I would like to zero in on one particular WhatsApp exchange between two key participants at these three sites and across multiple borders and cultures. My goal is to demonstrate how digital mediation complicates intercultural professional rhetorical work—specifically when we think about how power is exercised in those exchanges. For those of us who study or teach technical writing/technical communication for globalized contexts, these insights impact how we think about, frame, and engage these new and proliferating sites of contact between cultural others.

## Project Overview

### Research Question

[**SLIDE 2**] My project had at its core this question:

How do common communication technologies (email, phone, IM chat, etc.) define and transform intercultural rhetorical encounters?

I was also interested in the specific ways participants took up technologies and used them rhetorically in intercultural rhetorical encounters.

### Theoretical frameworks

**[SLIDE 3]** My theoretical frame for the project which I can only briefly summarize here was that Activity Theory (AT) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) could serve to help stabilize and study digitally mediated intercultural encounters. There is a great deal of precedence for using AT and ANT to study and understand rhetorical work in a variety of contexts.[[2]](#endnote-2) But there is still room to explore their application to everyday intercultural contexts and specifically in *digitally mediated* intercultural contexts.

#### Activity Theory

**[SLIDE 4]** For my own part, I privileged AT as the primary theoretical frame to organize and temporarily stabilize the complex activity happening at my research site. I think AT is valuable for analyzing intercultural encounters. It is a way to organize these encounters as “rhetorical situations.” I think its value shows up especially when we focus on the “objects” or “objectives,” at the heart of intercultural encounters. It’s important that we foreground the goals and objectives of our activity and the potential goals and objectives of the person with whom I am engaging especially if we’re from different “cultures.”

#### Actor-Network Theory

**[SLIDE 5]** ANT’s value is that it forces us to see our relations in the world as “flat.” The methodological principle of “symmetry” (Spinuzzi, 2015) is especially useful. This is the notion that humans, non-humans, and assemblages of human-non/human are treated as “agents” that “enroll and “unenroll” one another in activity. This perspective draws our attention to the ways “tools” “act” in a specific situation. In order to think through how digital tools might be mediating intercultural rhetorical work, we need to have our attention drawn to the material, non-human objects and environs in our world.

**[SLIDE 5: Animation 1]** I don’t have time to delve in depth to address my methodological “coordination” of these theories now. [[3]](#endnote-3) **[SLIDE 6]** But I will be exploring these methodological questions and their potential (or lack thereof) specifically for “decolonial” projects at CCCC*,* onFriday, March 16th, 2:00-3:15, Room: Mary Lou [ML] Williams B.[[4]](#endnote-4)

## Case Study Discussion

### Case Overview

**[SLIDE 7]** To my case study: I conducted research using a variety of ethnographic methods at two sites on the US-Mexico border where communication occurred on a daily basis between four different groups. I focused on the interactions between the coordinating administrative work of Border Products [BP] in El Paso, TX, their factory in Juárez, Mexico (itself a sister company *Productos de la Frontera, SA* [*PDLF*], and two of their major customers located in the Midwest United States: Midwest Products and Home Product Corp. I was specifically interested in the digital tools that these three sites used to engage one another. The tools of most interest were emails, phone calls (both smartphones and landlines), WhatsApp/WhatsApp Groups, and Google Drive cloud documents.

### AT Map of Case

**[SLIDE 8]** Using AT as an organizing frame I mapped the work happening at all three sites as a complex activity system, zooming in and out of various levels to get a sense of the “directedness” of work. I am not going to linger here, you don’t necessarily need to understand the minutiae of all this, rather—to quote Lucius Fox from Nolan’s 2005 *Batman Begins*—“I just wanted you to know how hard it was.”

### Digitally mediated intercultural rhetorical encounters

**[SLIDE 9]** In this process I was attempting to identify those key moments where digitally mediated rhetorical work was intersecting with what I could plausibly identify as cultural differences.

**[SLIDE 10]** From there, building on several heuristic conceptions of culture, including participants’ national identifiers, language history (mono/multilingual), migration history, and cultural self-identification, I pinpointed exchanges that occurred across those boundaries by incident and type of digital mediation.

**[SLIDE 10: Animation 1]** For our purposes today I want to zero in on one key example exchange between two of my participants Esteban & Roger. Roger and Esteban frequently engaged via WhatsApp on a variety of usually “high level” production or financial issues. Roger was the office manager of Midwest Products. Esteban was the VP but also essential a daily operations manager for both Border Products and the sister company, *Productos*.

### Example Exchange

**[SLIDE 11]** The exchange I’d like to focus on occurred in the first two weeks of May, 2016. A particular order (3253) had been delayed. In the context of discussing other orders, shipments, and payments, Roger texted to ask about the status of that order:

[Monday 5/9/16, 11:48AM] Esteban can you please advise regarding order 3253 last email gave us ship date of 4/29

After no response approaching 48 hours, he texted again:

[Wednesday 5/11/16, 9:16 AM] Please advise on 3253

Nearly six hours later on that same day Roger texted again with a palpable sense of urgency:

[Wednesday 5/11/16, 2:43 PM] Please advise asap on 3253 customer has called 4 times today for this info

At this point Esteban responds in quick succession:

[Wednesday 5/11/16, 2:43 PM] Sorry

We are staining the grids before assembly

Assembling by Friday to stain/finish. To ship mid next week

Esteban then sent several images [not included here] of the product in various stages of completion.

**[SLIDE 11: Animation 1]** When I spoke with Esteban about the exchange, I asked about that lag in his response to Roger between Monday and Wednesday. He looked at the date and time and said he was likely at or on his way to factory for the weekly production meeting. He suspected he thought to himself that he would check on the order then. He suspected he was sidetracked with activity both at factory and then back at the offices in El Paso. **[SLIDE 12]** Esteban noted that part of the reason he sent the pictures of the order is

“so that [Roger] can believe me. Because you know there’s always a trust issue. Because—‘Oh no, the order shipped’ and then…you know…a little bit of the Latin…sense of humor. No, not ‘sense of humor’ but way of doing business [laughs].”

Esteban’s explanation for the delay is focused on the material details of the activity in creating the product (i.e., where he was and what he had to do on Monday, the staining/assembly process is unique). *He* was not focused on amorphous notions of his culture or Roger’s. However, that *possibility* of a “Latin way of doing business”—that is, a culturally based motivation—lingers in the exchange. It’s significant enough that Esteban consciously sought to head off that possibility by sending images of the product in process.

### AT/ANT as analytical tools

**[SLIDE 13: Animation 1]** Placing individual exchanges within the map created specifically by AT we’re able to “slow down” the exchange conceptually in a way that allows us to analyze both the socio-cultural and material dynamics at play. Clearly several object/ive(s) are operating at once in the exchange: e.g., concern that the product manufactured properly, that it be delivered and delivered on time, and that participants manage their day and work in a reasonable way.

It was clear from my research that at the explicitly empirical, conscious level people are making decisions foremost with reference to the immediate ***object/ive(s)*** for their activity. Most rhetorical work revolves around meeting those material object/ive(s) (i.e., properly constructing the order, delivering it on time, negotiating issues with materials, navigating the border, etc.).

### Culture, Power, and Digital Tools in Intercultural Rhetorical Encounters

In the exchange with Roger we see Esteban acknowledging the presence of something like what we customarily think of as “cultural difference” operating in and through the digital mediation of the smartphone/WhatsApp tool. But it’s interesting that it occurred on Esteban’s “side” of the exchange, visible “in” his mind at some level. Esteban knows that Roger, because of Esteban’s “silence” in this exchange, may “invent” a version of him, potentially one based on his cultural identity as “Latin.”

**[SLIDE 13: Animation 2]** But placing the exchange in the AT framework helps us tease it more clearly.We can see that the “silences” created for Roger by Esteban’s lack of initial response in WhatsApp are constructed by the material conditions of the tool. People are expected to have their smartphones “on their person” (especially in a business context) or very nearby (e.g., on the desk). This intimacy created by the physical size of this particular mobile technology can creates conscious or unconscious expectations of (i.e., rules/norms for) response times to contact. Different people, in different contexts, regarding different issues are going to have differing “tolerance” for the “silences” created in and through our digitally mediated rhetorical work. **[SLIDE 13: Animation 3]** So the raw possibility of the immediacy of presence is the first “affordance” operant in this exchange. **[SLIDE 13: Animation 4]** But in Esteban’s initial lack of response we see a second affordance disclosed. There is a “distance” created by the text—in another sense it lacks the immediacy of face-to-face address so it is equally possible *not* to respond to a text in the moment. **[SLIDE 13: Animation 5]** And in this second affordance we see that the material complex of smartphone/Whatsapp is a site to exercise power. Not necessarily a *punitive* exercise of power, but the ability to even just exercise power over one’s time and focus. Recall that Esteban was likely on his way to the factory at the time of the first text in this particular exchange. He had the power to prioritize his time in that moment in a way far more challenging should a customer walk in and address themselves to Esteban.

This possibility of exercising power “flows through” the material conditions of the exchange created by the digital tools and interacts in a complex way with the shared and divergent *object/ive(s)* of all participants. “Culture” exists almost “ambiently,” lingering as an amorphous possibility in the mind of Esteban as a “Latin way of doing business.” From Esteban’s report to me, there is no intention of operating according to the principles or strictures of something like “Latinness”—rather the material conditions of his work dictate how he manipulates the tools available to him to make rhetorical choices with a perceived cultural “other.” Culture is doubly mediated—once by the paradoxically “close distance” created by the intimacy of the digital tool and once by the conceptual existence of another’s perception (i.e., Esteban is thinking about how Roger and Bob are thinking of him and BP as “Latin”).

## Findings/Key Takeaways

**[SLIDE 14]** The key takeaways for me, in thinking about the “so what”—what this means for scholars, practitioners, teachers, and students of “professional” or “technical” communication in a networked, global context—are several-fold:

1. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 1]** When engaging across digitally mediated borders/cultures, ***object/ive(s) should be at the center of mapping shared activity***.
   1. Our ability to identify “cultural” differences (e.g., something like a “Latin way of doing business”) must first contend with the historically conditioned things *people are trying to* ***do*** (or think they are trying to do) as the end goal of their encounter with cultural others. “Cultural values,” inasmuch as they exist, must be discussed explicitly in relation to **goals** and **objectives** of observable activity.
2. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 2]** Object/ive(s) still organize the exercise of “power” —both as means of resistance and coercion—exercised across borders and cultures in digitally mediated intercultural encounters.
3. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 3]** “Silence” is one (among many) of the affordances digital tools disclose to us also creates the space for us to “invent” the cultural other.
   1. This impulse or process of “invention” is in some ways unavoidable. But we must keep object/ive(s) at the center of our inventing—all while attending to the micro-, mezo-, and macro-material conditions of any given exchange.

Professional knowledge workers are having to contend with a rapidly changing ecology of digital tools available to them. Their (and our) ability to cope in intercultural environments will depend increasingly on the extent to which they are able to attend closely to how those tools are both defining and transforming our exchanges across cultures. I’ve moved very quickly here and am happy to field any questions or critical pushback in the Q & A. Thank you. **[SLIDE 15, 16]**

## Works Cited

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1. Document is keyed to presentation presented at ATTW 2018. See author for accompanying PowerPoint presentation. Email: [beau.pihlaja@ttu.edu](mailto:beau.pihlaja@ttu.edu). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Both theories have been used to analyze genres, student’s writing practices, as well as collaborative composition in online environments (Russell 1997; Bazerman & Russell, 2003, Bazerman, 2003, Spinuzzi 2007, 2010, 2011, 2014). Clay Spinuzzi in his 2008 *Network* conducted a comprehensive study of the mediated rhetorical work done at a single company. Huatong Sun in her *Cross Cultural Technology Design* (2012) proposes using AT as part of framework for developing usability across cultures. Rich Rice and Ben Lauren in a book chapter in *Digital Rhetoric and Global Literacies* (2014) propose using AT to develop an app that helps students develop in turn “intercultural competence.” Contributors to Paul Lynch and Nathanial Rivers’ recent (2015) volume *Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition* considered ANT (especially as it has been propagated by Latour) as it applied to various writing and rhetorical situations. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. AT and ANT have been tussling methodologically now for some time now (see Spinuzzi, 2008 for a summary of the height of debate at least up until then). For my own part I believe it is important to keep the sociocultural in view while also coordinating with this more “flat,” “open,” or “decentered” perspective that ANT affords us. The coordination has the potential to “unsettle” the conceptual “stability” of each and, I propose, prevents the perspectives from taking the reductively totalizing, universalizing stance such theories are rightly criticized for. It’s intriguing to me that in attempts to deploy or “apply” either AT (sociocultural) or ANT (new materialist) as a methodology governing some kind of research method, the instinct of researchers has been to “supplement” the one with some version of the other. Example: Clay Spinuzzi (2008) studies Telecorp with both AT and ANT as a means of both researching the network at his site but also foster a methodological dialogue. McNair & Paretti (2010)—who are of special interest to me *precisely* because they use AT as a lens to study digitally/technologically mediated professional work—still feel compelled to call upon Winner’s (1999) “politics of the artifact” and speech act theory to fill out their analysis. “Politics” as the site of power negotiations (flowing through specific tools) is a necessary lens for them, it seems. Huatong Sun’s CLUE framework calls first upon AT and then also genre theory and British cultural studies (with a particular awareness of the concepts of articulation, assemblage, questions of power, and even Latourian actor-network theory, 2012, pp. 62-63). Rose and Walton (2015) in a Sigdoc registering their “hopes” for posthumanism’s capacity to aid public design and usability analyses as well as their “concerns” surrounding potential ethical implications of the theories in its orbit (including new materialism) note the *ethical* importance of the sociocultural lens in any posthuman analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Suffice to say that new materialism in particular has increasingly become—may we say “attuned”? (We may.)—to its critics from a variety of fields and positionalities. Micciche (2014) and Grant (2017) have challenged new materialism in productive ways from feminist and indigenous rhetorical perspectives. This is important. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)