

Rhetoric of Leadership

Retoryka przywództwa

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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Review/Recenzja: Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter. 2017. *Professional Communication and Network Interaction: A Rhetorical and Ethical Approach*. Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Communication. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

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As Internship Coordinator at University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), I am often challenged by communicating the varied career paths in what we call *professional writing* at UNCW. Job titles rarely have the word “writing” in them these days. That’s how much the field of professional communication has changed in the last few decades. Most professional communication textbooks do not represent these changes, making it difficult to provide students with rhetorical models that will prove effective in emerging communication networks. Students and professionals too often see communication as a linear process in static spaces, which leads to communication practices that are inadequate for today’s networked spaces.

McKee and Porter provide clear rhetorical models that incorporate participatory networks and illustrate those models with case studies that are relevant to students, interns, and employees. The disassociation between rhetoric, ethics, and delivery has led to obvious corporate missteps in public relations. To be effective communicators, we need to reintegrate these elements.

First, McKee and Porter show how rhetoric, communication, and ethics overlap in a variety of ways within today’s networked environments. Through a careful analysis of rhetorical history, they show how dominant approaches to rhetoric deemphasize ethics and delivery – two rhetorical elements that are emphasized by today’s communication networks. But if we look closely at the work of Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, rhetoric has often been closely entwined with ethics or the “good man speaking” (Qtd. in 15). Because we tend to separate ethics from rhetoric, professional communication is full of missteps where corporations have mishandled a crisis or public relations incidents.

McKee and Porter use several cases from corporate social media to show how the reintegration of ethics into rhetoric and communication will create more effective

interactions between audiences and stakeholders (59-60). Though aspects of this theoretical model are deeply embedded in Greek and Roman theories, the examples make these new models clear. Both theorists and practitioners will find this exploration useful.

To integrate ethics more deeply, today's student and professional need to understand their communication practices not as content delivery, but as community building — what McKee and Porter call *phatic communication*. Under this lens, the primary purpose of communication is not to persuade or deliver content, but to build and maintain networks through goodwill (46-47). So technical writers are not just writing and delivering content, they are creating and maintaining help spaces, where productive interaction can happen between users, developers, and other stakeholders. Having students google job titles with “writer” in them may not be too successful, because now writers do much more than write (in the traditional sense).

In addition to recovering ethical aspects of communication, McKee and Porter rearticulate delivery, or *actio*, as more than non-verbal aspects of rhetoric (66). A rhetor's delivery is key to creating interaction and making connections, forcing us to think about how rhetorical texts perform through time between connection points. To do this we must understand *network* as a dynamic space created by participants (both human and non-human), rather than a fixed space where participants move in and out. Their distinction between *platform* and *network* is particularly useful for understanding how today's technology brings this dynamic interaction to the foreground. Social media sites are not networks, but platforms that enable networking (76). Corporations and communicators have to do more than build networks; they have maintain them. Without interaction these networks cease to be.

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a useful tool for understanding how these networks are constantly becoming. McKee and Porter clearly lay out how ANT captures more complexity within any communication act, but especially those that rely on web technologies. Their case study on artificial intelligence illustrates how technology is increasingly an actor in these networks. In order to successfully communicate, students and professionals need to understand how they and corporations are participating in a dynamic, always becoming network.

In the end, this book provides a methodological approach to analyzing rhetorical acts from a networked perspective, but also provides models, ideas, and examples that can be used to prepare students and professionals for 21st century communication contexts. I could easily assign one of these chapters to my interns to help them rethink what they do in the workplace. At the same time, this book rearticulates important theories for today's scholars of rhetoric.