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## Review of *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*; 1<sup>st</sup> rev. and expanded ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

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There may be no more obvious popular book to review for the first issue of a journal on rhetoric, professional communication, and globalization than Thomas L. Friedman's *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. Friedman, bestselling author of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, attempts to demystify globalization and suggest ways that governments and corporations will need to quickly adjust in an increasingly competitive market environment. Consistently as ambitious as the title suggests, Friedman's book describes much of interest to technical communicators, especially those of us who just can't travel enough to see things first hand as we'd like to. The beauty of Friedman's book, for me, lies in his entertaining descriptions of scenes that I could only have imagined: the reminiscences of the programmers who developed the first Web servers; the chatter at a computer customer service call center in India; the view from a Bangalore corporate campus golf course; and interviews with Colin Powell's staff and Georgia Tech's president. As a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, Friedman is a gifted rhetor and a skillful storyteller.

For readers who are not familiar with the book, the "flat world" metaphor bears some explication. The "flat" aspect hearkens to the cliché "leveling the playing field," but the major visual Friedman suggests for a non-flat world is one in which inaccessible mountains of wealth are jealously guarded by certain superpowers, and the remaining groups, be they forgotten tribes or developing nations, are merely exploited or ignored. The flat world Friedman has observed essentially relocates centers of work and wealth at the whim of multinational conglomerates which will produce commodities and offer services wherever it is most profitable to do so, spurring entrepreneurship on a more global scale than previously experienced. Friedman patiently explains how and why American jobs are being outsourced to India (to the tune of a

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quarter million call center jobs by 2006) and why American manufacturing seems to have moved overnight to China, events which simply baffle many Americans like me (“How could we have let this happen?”). The keys to such flattening have been geopolitical realities as one might expect, but also, somewhat more surprisingly, ubiquity of personal computers and the rise of the Indian and Chinese middle classes, both of which trends have been furthered by the United States’ domestic and foreign policy for decades.

The almost-unquenchable enthusiasm Friedman has for the high-tech corporate sector is forgivable, given the timing of the publication of the updated, expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> edition that I read for this review (in 2006; pre-economic meltdown). But I say “almost” unquenchable because he does acknowledge that the forces (such as networked computing) that “flattened” the world in terms of economic redistribution are also available to terrorists and extremist regimes. So while Friedman does allay fears about the US swapping positions with China to some degree, the book tends to hit an overly optimistic note when discussing the wonders of the lean, competitive university, and the mantra that everything’s going to be just fine because America can produce ideas and doesn’t *need* factory and service jobs.

Friedman’s descriptions of high-tech phenomena, from the birth of the World Wide Web to Wikipedia, are interesting and more nuanced than many others I’ve read. While he does tend to swoon over the concept of community-developed online resources (such as the Apache Web server), he acknowledges what experienced technical writing instructors know. Wikipedia is a fabulous free resource but sometimes, you get what you pay for. Friedman provides the canonical example of the damage done to John Seigenthaler, Sr. by malicious and viral Wikipedia entries. In Friedman’s words, “the community is not always right, the network doesn’t always self-correct” (124). Unfortunately, such cautious wisdom is typically overshadowed by his unbridled approbation of all things available on the Internet.

And, at any rate, the networked business model and all the changes concomitant with it cannot be stopped; the genie is out of the bottle. Friedman points out that the technological capabilities—digital, mobile, virtual, and personal—we’ve created are, in the words of former HP CEO Carly Fiorina, poised to “literally transform every aspect of business, every aspect of life and every aspect of society” (233). Such capabilities will move work around to unpredictable geographic locations because geography no longer impedes knowledge work. When you place your order in the Taco Bell drive-through, it may be processed by a worker across the globe if they will handle the order for a lower cost than an American —our zest for laying fiber-optic cable apparently gave us better means for transporting communications across the globe than we have for using wireless Internet services within the US.

I have to admit it was with relief that I turned to “The Unflat World,” and the later sections of the book. Friedman admits that he is a technological determinist (460), believing that “capabilities create intentions” (460). Feenberg’s *Critical Theory of Technology* is a useful interjection right

about here, but assuming you're familiar with the concept of determinism, it's somewhat self-evident (given previous statements by Friedman) as one reads the book. However, he then states that he is not a "historical" determinist, and knows that just because technologies can and will be employed, they will not necessarily be employed beneficently. I didn't find the distinction particularly illuminating, and it would be hardly worth mentioning except that in the same paragraph, Friedman admits that he knows the world *isn't* flat, which rather blows his controlling metaphor, yet allows him to engage in a couple of specific and interesting discussions about "unflatteners." Those are forces that make it impossible for the benefits of technology to improve the standard of living globally.

Friedman identifies sickness, disempowerment, and frustration in the "unflat" world as factors that militate against further flattening. He insists on a definition of the middle class as a status in which "hope" is possible. I was frustrated that he did not develop the definition of "third world" as the polarization between the wealthy and the poor, a sort of reverse bell curve of prosperity. While he speaks at length about the rising middle class in both China and India, the shrinking middle class of the US is not examined as thoroughly. The other topic I would like to see addressed by Friedman, that is almost embarrassingly absent in this book, is consideration of societies in places like Tibet and the Amazon which lack high-tech infrastructure and highly educated workforces, and thus, appear to be excluded from the democratizing promise of the "flattened" world. I suspect that Friedman could do much justice to this topic if sufficiently motivated, but the dearth of wireless in Tibet would be a disincentive for such an investigation.

For those of us who teach or study rhetoric and professional communication, much of *The World Is Flat* fits the verbal gloss of our classrooms—the cautionary tales we tell students about competitiveness and culture and flexibility; the recognition that industries are globalizing before our eyes; and the trivia about how personal computers, email, the Internet and the World Wide Web came to be. If you are just realizing that entire American industries (not just jobs) are being offshored to India and China, you will be relieved to know Friedman thinks that Americans may gain in global stability what we lose in competitive advantage. If you are actively involved in enterprises such as teaching of International Communication, Friedman's book may be old news to you (but probably not to your students). Friedman's book clearly has much to offer as one perspective on current transformations in global commerce, but I'm going to move to his more recent *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How it Can Renew America*, the next time I need a read that is neither academic nor escapist.