

offended. Humor works rhetorically by wrapping a challenge to our beliefs in something that makes us feel good—a joke—and thus makes us more receptive to the new idea.

This goes not just for new ideas, but for the people who are presenting those ideas. Whether it is gentle tongue-in-cheek teasing or bitter irony, humor may help a writer to make a point without, for instance, seeming to preach to the audience or take himself or herself too seriously. Political commentator Ruth Marcus employs gentle humor in the following essay from 2010 in which she addresses the speaker of the House of Representatives and objects to the members of Congress using electronic devices during hearings and other deliberations. Even the title, a play on words, signals the humorous tone: “Crackberry Congress.” Let’s look at a few passages:

from *Crackberry Congress*

RUTH MARCUS

Mr. Speaker, please don’t.

Go ahead, if you must, and cut taxes. Slash spending. Repeal health care. I understand. Elections have consequences. But BlackBerry and iPads and laptops on the House floor? Reconsider, before it’s too late.

The current rules bar the use of a “wireless telephone or personal computer on the floor of the House.” The new rules, unveiled last week, add three dangerous words. They prohibit any device “that impairs decorum.”

In other words, as long as you’ve turned down your cellphone ringer and you’re not strolling around the floor chatting with your broker or helping the kids with their homework, feel free to tap away.

If the Senate is the world’s greatest deliberative body, the House is poised to be the world’s greatest tweeting one.

A few upfront acknowledgements. First, I’m not one to throw stones. I have been known to sneak a peek, or 10, at my BlackBerry during meetings. For a time my daughter had my ringtone set to sound like a squawking chicken; when I invariably forgot to switch to vibrate, the phone would cluck during meetings. In short, I have done my share of decorum-impairing.

Second, let’s not get too dreamy about the House floor. John Boehner, the incoming speaker, once passed out campaign checks from tobacco companies there. One of his former colleagues once came to the chamber with a paper bag on his head to dramatize his supposed embarrassment at fellow lawmakers’ overdrafts at the House bank. Worse things have happened on the House floor than a game of Angry Birds—check it out!—on the iPad.

Nonetheless, lines have to be drawn, and the House floor is not a bad place to draw them. Somehow, it has become acceptable to e-mail away in the midst of meetings. Even Emily Post has blessed what once would have been obvious rudeness, ruling that “tapping on a handheld device is okay if it’s related to what’s being discussed.”

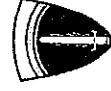
The larger war may be lost, but not the battle to keep some remaining space in life free of gadgetry and its distractions. I’m not talking Walden Pond—just a few minutes of living the unplugged life. There are places—dinner table, church, school and, yes, the House floor—where multitasking is inappropriate, even disrespectful.

First of all, Marcus structures her criticism as a letter, which obviously is a fiction and sets a humorous note right away. Who, after all, would begin a letter to the Speaker of the House by saying, “please don’t”? Marcus often works by teasing about “decorum,” yet she makes a serious point about “connectivity” as she exaggerates her fear that “the House is poised to be the world’s greatest tweeting [body].” Humor is also one of her strategies for establishing ethos in this case, as she says, “I’m not one to throw stones” and admits to checking her own BlackBerry during meetings. Overall, by taking a more lighthearted approach and not sounding like Ms. Manners, Marcus makes her point about the inappropriateness of elected officials interacting with their electronic devices while colleagues and others are debating important issues.

Marcus could have marshaled all manner of examples that illustrate the decline in civility and courtesy in modern life, but readers would likely have dismissed her as old-fashioned or shrill. By taking a humorous approach, she appeals to readers’ sense of humor as well as their community values; don’t we want our elected officials to forego “instantaneous communication” for more thoughtful deliberations when they are making decisions about the laws of the land?

• ACTIVITY •

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, distributed the following Order of the Day to the military troops right before the 1944 D-Day invasion of Normandy. Discuss how General Eisenhower appeals to pathos.



Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped, and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.