Foreword

LOCATING ETHOS, CREDIBILITY, AND POWER IN THE (DIGITAL) RHETORICAL TRADITION

In its earliest incarnation, ethos resulted from the “good man speaking well,” according to the Roman rhetorician Quintilian (2001). Certainly, this definition is a product of its historical moment, one in which the rhetorical situation typically represented a masculine public sphere relying upon oral discourse in political and judicial contexts. Whether in print or speech, this definition held for nearly two millennia, privileging a particularly narrow view of argument that positioned ethos within the public persona of the writer or speaker, an embodied phenomenon that even numerous textbooks in our contemporary moment continue to uphold as they stress critical reading, writing and listening strategies to detect the ways rhetoricians gain and maintain credibility with audiences. Yet those Greek and Roman rhetoricians could not have envisioned the extent to which ethos and credibility would circulate so pervasively in a digital era of ubiquitous information access and equally ubiquitous information overload. Indeed, one user’s online trash is another’s online treasure and, unlike the conception of ethos reserved for the canonical speakers and writers we often consume in graduate seminars on rhetorical history, ethos, like Foucault’s (1978) concept of power, is everywhere. Ethos circulates within both social and news media spaces from Facebook to the New York Times, within online resources that include Google and Wikipedia, and, ever more increasingly, within the algorithms behind those spaces that track our movements and present us with information in ways that hail us as audiences. These tools garner ethos and credibility by providing today’s Web 2.0 audiences what they want to see and hear, or what they think we need to hear about which news source to read, which political pundit to believe or not, and which link to click.

Moe Folk and Shawn Apostel superbly captured this dynamic landscape in their first edited volume, Online Credibility and Digital Ethos: Evaluating Computer-Mediated Communication (2013), a collection featuring both national and international scholars who situate the topic in theories of design and arrangement, ideologies and epistemologies of information access, contexts that range from digital scholarly publishing to popular news media and games, and tools as diverse as weblogs, LinkedIn, and Wikipedia. What became clear through this first compilation is that not only does our understanding of ethos shift and evolve at a pace similar to the digital rhetorical contexts in which online personae flourish but also that our corresponding operational definitions of credibility must move beyond the face to face, the alphabetic, the monolingual/modal, and the heteronormative.

Given the fact that digital technology advances more rapidly than the print-based publishing processes that academics are compelled to rely upon to circulate scholarship about such technology, it makes sense to say, ala the late novelist Jacqueline Susann (1973), that “once is not enough.” Indeed, within this
landscape of online information exchange, the three years since the publication of Folk and Apostel’s first volume approximates an epoch. And while those initial conversations nevertheless maintain their currency, it’s even more vital to extend the dialogue, bridging the gap between the academy and the larger culture by conducting further critical analyses of the spaces occupied by our students and ourselves. With that thought in mind, Folk’s and Apostel’s *Establishing and Evaluating Digital Ethos and Online Credibility* represents an equally diverse sequel in its emphasis on the latest genres and tools of identity formation, to the online dating profile to the ever-pervasive meme, not to mention its sustained attention to international perspectives on social media space, with contributors from Canada, Egypt, France, Spain, and Turkey. Although this collection does as much as the first in its focus on the what’s and why’s of online credibility and ethos, it moves its readers forward in its focus on both process and product, using a broad but helpful array of theoretical, methodological, pedagogical, and ethical frameworks.

Moreover, these essays strongly suggest that ethos is a multiliterate process (Selber, 2004), for while many students and citizens possess functional literacies in that they know how to use various communication tools, their ability to critically read and ethically produce content is another matter. Many of the essays provide strong guidance in this regard through their own rhetorical example as well as through specific strategies for individual and classroom adoption so that researchers and teachers benefit equally. In this sense, the collection as a whole represents a powerful call to action, as it is explicit in its presumption that the numerous non-academic settings in which both ethos and credibility circulate are ones that must be studied in academic settings by both teachers and students. And as some contributors suggest, our traditional ways of understanding credibility need to be updated. For Jill R. Kavanaugh and Bartłomiej A. Lenart, this includes that standard emphasis on student information literacy training. Given the rise of open access and anonymous posting, our definitions of authorship, peer review, and ultimately credibility are what needs to be reevaluated. Yet, even as we apply more flexible criteria to assess credibility in an era of Web 2.0, another assumption subject to reevaluation is our ability as citizens to access reliable, objective information in mainstream news media, something we take for granted in the United States, yet is of great concern for international journalists and the diverse communities they serve. Ceren Sözeri provides a powerful case study of Turkish news organizations’ efforts to sustain impartiality, immediacy, and transparency, relying on interviews with both mainstream and independent media journalists as they discuss strategies to maintain a culture of trust in reporting. Admittedly, trust is an increasingly difficult standard measure for Western media outlets as well.

Academics who study and teach ethos and credibility online and off will learn that these concepts are not only rhetorical and technological but also cultural, subject to assumptions and limitations about who does what, where, and how. For instance, Alison A. Lukowski and Ericka M. Sparby make visible the challenges women have in establishing ethos in blog- and wiki-based settings and the epistemological values in digital space that prohibit and discount women’s experiential knowledge, even on topics of motherhood and breastfeeding. These hierarchies also extend to other types of health and wellness spaces, something Abigail Baake articulates in her analysis of medical information sites like WebMD and the need for better balance between physician expertise and patient experience.

Such discussions document the ways in which ethos and credibility are reinscribed in many virtual contexts as individual, and often male-dominated, rather than the result of a collective, activist, and even feminist partnership. Contributor Samaa Gamie applies a feminist analysis to the ethos of the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, and the ability of these collective digital discourses to “challenge patriarchy and the concentration of power in virtual spaces.” For Gamie and others, such co-constructions of ethos are dynamic and span time, text, and space, something Wendi Sierra and Douglas Eyman also
address in their analysis of a newer game, Elder Scrolls Online. As Sierra and Eyman note, because gaming spaces rely on external sources for knowledge building and credibility, they challenge classical assumptions about a stabilized sense of ethos solely in the persona of the rhetor. While ethos and credibility may be more difficult to pinpoint in such spaces, the websites we visit and the search engines we utilize have their own agency, using surveillance software to track our activities and use those activities to appeal to us. As a result, as Estee Beck and others in this collection imply, today’s rhetorical education should not be so very far removed from the classical emphasis on the ethical personae, but should shift that ethical standard from the individual to the site itself and its inherently value-laden rhetorical practices. Despite Selber’s useful triangulation of functional, critical, and rhetorical multiliteracies, a literate education should emphasize the ethical as well, helping citizens better interrogate the policies and practices of the spaces we use, and that undoubtedly use us.

Rhetorical tools and situations may have evolved since the times of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, but Establishing and Evaluating Digital Ethos and Online Credibility proves that the credibility of people, information, and space is thriving online. Ethos, rather than being a lost art of persuasion, is like writing itself, remediated (Bolter, 2001) and circulating in virtual space. This remediation mandates ongoing analysis that undoubtedly sustains and reshapes the rhetorical tradition as it continues into the digital age, an era where a hashtag, a meme, or a like has as much power to reflect and shape cultural values as a political speech or a news article. Folk and Apostel’s collection admirably fulfills this analytical goal and will undoubtedly serve as a multidisciplinary resource for global scholars and educators working along the axes of literacy, communication, and technology studies.

Kristine L. Blair
Youngstown State University, USA

REFERENCES


