Foreword

When digital rhetoric first emerged as a discipline in the 1990s, its initial objects of study were situated strongly in the English language and the Global North. Hypertext fiction, electronic poetry, and websites from corporations, candidates, and taste-makers were situated in familiar frames of cultural, linguistic, and political reference. The work of Richard Lanham, Jay David Bolter, Michael Joyce, and other early practitioners within niche realms of academia did little to promote a truly World Wide Web. As digital rhetoric continues to become a recognized subfield, those asked to define it, such as Doug Eyman, Cheryl Ball, and Jentery Sayers seem to often steer clear of subaltern discourses, even if queer and disabled rhetorical contexts are slated for inclusion by Jonathan Alexander and Melanie Yergeau respectively (Digital Rhetoric Collaborative, 2012).

Although anonymity could create disquieting acts of verbal, visual, or procedural rhetorical violence in the earlier digital rhetoric model, as in the case of the behavior of the aggressor described in Julian Dibbell’s 1993 “A Rape in Cyberspace” or Mark Dery’s pathological subjects jockeying for attention and mastery in his 1994 Flame Wars, such conduct resisted interpretation rather than defied comprehension. Even critics who took hoax, parody, or fraudulent websites at face value understood the rhetorical appeals that had initially grabbed their attention and had encouraged their credulity.

However, after the founding of Flickr in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006, the presence of other kinds of global content-creators in very different rhetorical contexts became more obvious, and the boundaries of nation and language in the cyberspaces of everyday life (Nunes, 2006) were redrawn with the rise of new region-specific platforms far away from the familiar discourses of either Silicon Valley or DIY subculture. Sites such as Weibo in China, Cyworld in South Korea, and Orkut in Brazil soon had hundreds of millions of users. As Geert Lovink has pointed out the era of the English-dominated Internet has probably ended even in Europe.

Certainly the increasing internationalization of online video remixing and sharing on many other competing sites has made decoding the provenance of digital objects of study notably much more complex. The language of new media at work in what Lev Manovich has called “database cinema” may draw on literally hundreds of sources in just a few minutes of rapidly changing video clips, and global online remix videos make too many cultural references for a critic in another country to unpack. Furthermore the songs, films, and cultural allusions chosen by many transnational video remixers can reflect a unique orientation of multiple understandings of citizenship. If classical rhetorician could assumes citizenship to be a relatively stable category of subjectivity, digital rhetoricians today can make no such assumptions. Whether it be transnational videogame fan films (Losh, 2010) or human rights music video remixes from the Arab Spring (Gregory & Losh, 2012), digital content-creators are appropriating, mashing up, and crowd-sourcing new forms of digital rhetoric that require new modes of interdisciplinary collaboration.
Remixed images, video, and sound may need to be “unmixed” (Losh, 2012) to be comprehensible for purposes of academic analysis as copies and originals become scrambled.

This is not simply a challenge facing scholars of the rhetorics of visual culture, those working with verbal rhetorics and procedural rhetorics (Bogost, 2007) must also think about questions of internationalization as new forms of digital capital come into play, and new economics oriented around reputation, membership, or attention reorder the social relations in which performative utterances function. For example, how might an SMS mobile money transfer of an earnings remittance in Kenya in the “financial inclusion assemblage” of “subjects, technics, and rationalities” (Shwittay, 2010) be understood as a rhetorical activity? Or how might the labor of a gold farmer in the massive online game World of Warcraft (Nakamura, 2010) be staged within existing conventions of deliberation, celebration, and judgment as rhetorical actors assume new online roles? What sense can we make of cybervigilantism in India (Shah, 2010) or Internet activism in South Korea that connects mad cow disease associated with meat imports from abroad to ideals of racial purity at home (Chun, 2009)?

Furthermore, as we approach understanding our own participation in the “Internet of things” – as mobile and ubiquitous computing technologies disseminate around the globe, the design of sensors and screens transforms subject-object relations, and more sophisticated machine learning algorithms, data mining approaches, semantic web technologies, and AI chatbots are developed – the very notion of “literacy” is changing as computers become able to read and write and speak in new ways. For example, what should digital rhetoric make of QR codes or RFID devices in considering how we are situated as rhetorical actors in particular rhetorical scenes?

This volume represents a fundamentally new approach to digital rhetoric and global literacy that puts forward a collection of distinct theoretical frameworks that can be used by contemporary rhetoricians to understand these hybrid and heterogeneous case studies from around the world, which challenge the possibilities that our always-already mediated discourse can ever exist in a single, unified, and coherent Habermassian public sphere or that persuasion as it is conventionally understood should be the main focus of our inquiry. It also seriously engages with the category of infrastructural messiness to show the complexities of glocalization and the failures of a techno-missionary agenda epitomized by One-Laptop-Per-Child. Verhulsdonck and Limbu bring knowledge to this project from vibrant scholarly communities both in the study of games and virtual worlds and in digital pedagogy and multimodal composition. They also bring the perspectives of their own complex literacy narratives, which are informed by their own experiences of transnational citizenship, technical expertise, and interdisciplinary research. The book is organized in a way that makes current trends in the field visible and represents the shift in digital rhetoric toward serious engagement with 1) computer science, 2) international studies, and 3) user-centered design. Those working in more traditional rhetorical contexts will appreciate the fact that a number of the articles are still grounded in familiar frameworks of literary study, classical oratory, or mass communication, but – be warned – this is not a book for armchair theorists. Journalists, programmers, and teachers discuss how they are applying theory to practice and readers should be prepared to cross the “yacking/hacking” divide with them. After all, digital rhetoric is a mode of being and doing for all of us, since we all are participant observers.

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Elizabeth Losh is the author of Virtualpolitik: An Electronic History of Government Media-Making in a Time of War, Scandal, Disaster, Miscommunication, and Mistakes (MIT Press, 2009) and the forthcoming The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University (MIT Press). She is the co-author of the forthcoming textbook Understanding Rhetoric (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2013) with Jonathan Alexander and is co-editor of Tweeting the Revolution: Networked Media, the Rhetorics of Activism, and Practices of the Everyday with Beth Coleman. She is Director of the Culture, Art, and Technology program at Sixth College at U.C. San Diego and a blogger for Digital Media and Learning Central. She writes about new forms of learning, institutions as digital content-creators, the discourses of the “virtual state,” the media literacy of policy makers and authority figures, and the rhetoric surrounding regulatory attempts to limit everyday digital practices.

REFERENCES


