Chapter 17
Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond Deceptive Communications Strategies in the Digital World

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ABSTRACT
Deceptive communications strategies are further problematized in digital space. Because digitally mediated communication easily accommodates pseudonymous and anonymous speech, digital ethos depends upon finding the proper balance between the ability to create pseudonymous and anonymous online presences and the public need for transparency in public speech. Analyzing such content requires analyzing media forms and the honesty of speakers themselves. This chapter applies Michel Foucault’s articulation of parrhesia—the ability to speak freely and the concomitant public duties it requires of speakers—to digital communication. It first theorizes digital parrhesia, then outlines a techno-semiotic methodological approach with which researchers—and the public—can consider online advocacy speech. The chapter then analyzes one case of astroturfing, and one of sockpuppeting, using this techno-semiotic method to indicate the generalizability of the theory of digital parrhesia, and the utility of the techno-semiotic approach.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter aims to analyze a variety of deceptive communication strategies and practices taking place in the digital world. Examining phenomena of astroturfing done by corporate actors to sockpuppet comments and other misconduct by private actors, we try to understand how deceptive communications practices are further problematized in the digital space, where ethos depends on finding a proper balance between the ability to create pseudonymous or anonymous online presences, and the public need for transparency in public speech.
Among these deceptive communication practices we include, astroturfing—fake grassroots campaigns about matters of public interest—presents a special problem to researchers, particularly to those interested in studying the content of advocacy speech. Specifically, the content may be true, and even compelling, but if the honesty of the speaker is questionable, that truth may be a house of cards. This concern is heightened because of the fake accounts or false posts used by so-called “sockpuppets.” In recent years, these wrongdoings even extended to the private sphere with the multiplication of fake social network accounts used for cyberbullying or cyberharassment. These deceptive communication practices threaten the prospect that the Web could function as a public sphere and therefore need to be taken into account in our analysis.

In previous work, we expanded Pramad K. Nayar’s application of parrhesia to digital space (2010), relying, as did Nayar, on Foucault’s articulation of this ancient Greek concept (Foucault, 2001). In this chapter we further develop our previous research on parrhesia and digital parrhesia (Gilewicz and Allard-Huver, 2012) Thus, we not only derive a model for analyzing the credibility of digital advocacy speech and a model for truth-telling in the digital public sphere, but also implement a theoretical and pragmatic method for understanding ethos and its implication on the web. Parrhesia, or the ability to speak freely, implies three public duties for speakers: to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent themselves when speaking. Astroturfing, sockpuppets or other online misbehavior that conceals identities in order to reduce the risks of speaking truth to power—or to the public—always fails the latter duty.

In networked space, however, pseudonymous and anonymous speech can work both democratically and propagandistically. We think that the legitimate need to speak the truth in this space does not forbid the right to protect your identity in specific situation, but the examples we chose to explore here show abusive use of pseudonyms or anonymity. This chapter proposes that digital parrhesia helps evaluate deceptive communication strategies and helps understand why such evaluation matters. By using digital parrhesia to analyze these online communication practices, this chapter’s analytic model aims to contribute to the preservation—and maybe the revivification of—a culture of truth-telling.

BACKGROUND: BEEKEEPING OR ASTROTURFING?

Recently an important phenomenon of bee mortality has been observed around the globe. Every year, nearly 30-60% of the bee colonies are unable to survive the winter, a phenomenon called “CCD - Colony Collapse Disorder” by scientific experts (Evans et al., 2009). As some observers raise the specter of a total disappearance of bees in the forthcoming years, several scientific hypotheses have been advanced to explain CCD. The first is related to the multiplication of colonies diseases – such as parasites, mites or fungus. Another one blames the current agricultural system and intensive agriculture leading to bee malnutrition. Intensive beekeeping and selection of more docile but more fragile species are part of the assumptions. However, one of the main explanations given by scientists is that crop protection products – pesticides – play a determining role in the general weakness and therefore mortality of beehives (Henry et al., 2012) but is also subject to harsh fights between scientists (Cresswell & Thompson, 2012). Nonetheless, the insecticide class of neonicotinoids, such as imidacloprid, fipronil or thiamethoxam, is suspected to disorient and weaken the bees. These three insecticides are respectively sold under the commercial name Gaucho, Regent TS and Cruiser by Bayer, BASF and Syngenta, three of the world largest chemical and agricultural companies. Many sound science
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