Chapter 8

New Media and Technology: How Do They Change the Notions of the Rhetorical Situations?

Ramesh Pokharel
University of Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

New media and technology have an overall impact in our lives including the way we write and read a text, and teach writing. By altering our literacy practices, new media and technology always create a new situation, and require the users to use it in a defined way, and “to explain what a tool [technology] is and how to use it seems to demand narrative” (Nye, 2006, p. 5). In this chapter, the author creates a narrative that tells stories how new media and technology have created a new situation to redefine/reexamine/remap/revive the existing notions of the rhetorical situation. The author begins by offering a definition of new media and technology, and the impact of new media and technology in changing the notions of the rhetorical situation. The author then discusses how new media and technology has changed the notions of the rhetorical situation.

INTRODUCTION

Humans had technologies before they invented language. For example, humans had skills or tools for hunting food before they learned to use human language systematically. People have used technology as a medium to do something in a better way and communicate across space and time from time immemorial, as Nye (2006) says, “One way to define ‘technology’ is in terms of evolution” (p. 1). Technology is so much attached with evolution that it is “not foreign to ‘human nature’ but inseparable from it” and “technologies have been used for social evolution” (Nye, 2006, p. 2). Technologies are characterized as social evolution, and as an ever-changing, ever-advancing site, because they always facilitate human lives with the supply of tools and methodologies to meet their necessities, which humans continually redefine to suit their needs (Nye, 2006, p. 2). However, there are mutual relationships between necessity and technology: most of the time necessity engenders technologies, and sometimes technologies (tools) generate necessity. So, “Technologies are not just objects but also the skills needed to use them”
New Media and Technology

(Nye, 2006, p. 4), hence both object and process. The ancient Greeks used the word “techne” instead of technology which had to do with skills in the arts that meant rational faculty used in making something, and a productive quality exercised in combination with true reasoning.

Over time, technology has advanced and become more complex thereby making human consciousness more complex. Consequently, linear media such as print failed to capture the structure of our thought. As an intellectual predicament of the second half of the twentieth century, we experienced flickering focus, a deferral of meaning between the signifier and the signified. On this backdrop, geared up by advanced technology (digital technology), new media, as a new medium of human expression, was born as “a sign of our current confusion about where these efforts are leading and our breathlessness at the place of change” (Murray, 2003, p. 3). Though communication scholar, Marshall McLuhan, first used the term “new media” in 1953, “the term really emerged in the late 1990s when it began to be used as an all-encompassing description for emerging and digital technologies” (Smith & Hendricks, 2010, p. 4). So, new media is usually associated with the spread of information digitally that is characterized by computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication. Smith and Hendricks (2012) argue that new media surpasses just digital communication and just the technology that made it possible. For them:

*It has become associated with converged, computerized, networked, interactive and compressible technologies and information. If we go with this all-encompassing definition, we are primarily talking about only the technology that truly makes it new media. For many, the definition goes even further. It is not just the technology, but it is the way in which we interact with the technology that truly makes it new media.* (Smith & Hendricks, 2012, p. 5)

Like Smith and Hendricks, Kember and Zylinska (2012), in *Life after New Media*, extends the definition of new media even further. They make a significant shift in the way new media is perceived and understood “as a set of discrete objects…to understanding media [new media] predominantly in terms of processes of mediation” (p. xiii). For them, new media as processes of mediation “is a complex and hybrid process that is simultaneously economic, social, cultural, psychological, and technical” (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. xv). This can be a big debate on new media scholarship, but I am not going to explore this issue here because of my research limitation. I will define new media only in terms of its technological feature that could be useful in our discipline.

We cannot move along without new media and technology because new media and technology is inevitable in our lives, and has so much impacted our lives that we have become cyborg both physically and mentally. As a powerful means to master the complexity of life, new media has enabled us to understand complex world around us, and, thus, helped us to “refigure our bodies, our cultures, ourselves in hopeful ways” (Murray, 2003, p. 5). Many scholars have felt the need to define new media and technology. So, there have been many efforts to define and explain new media and technology. However, “[e]fforts to understand, explain, and analyze the new media are demanding and endlessly complex” (Dennis, 1998, p. xi), because, as Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) believe, new media has been defined in terms of technological, economic, behavioral, and critical/cultural issues that deal with system features and services, industry structure and ownership, psychology of media users, and content and forms, respectively. I divide this chapter into two broad parts: definition of new media and technology, and the impact of new media and technology in changing the notions of the rhetorical situation. While in the first part, I