Chapter 1

On Pixels, Perceptions, and Personae: Toward a Model of Online Ethos

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ABSTRACT

This chapter works toward a four-part model of online ethos connecting classical rhetorical theory to the new age of computer-mediated technology with particular attention paid to the challenges, complications, and possibilities of this evolving rhetorical environment. This model demonstrates the usefulness of updating our understanding of ethos and its place in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The proposed model allows for the assessment of digital ethos by examining others’ attempts to develop an online identity based upon: (1) Community Identification and Goodwill, (2) Moral Character and Virtue, (3) Intelligence and Knowledge, and (4) Verbal and Design Competence.

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web (WWW) and other online media are no longer infant technologies. They have matured to become an instrumental part of our social, economic, and political reality. While there are many wonders left to be borne out of them, and they certainly have no shortage of cheerleaders, they are not perfect. Viruses and worms infect them. Pornographic material contaminates them. Confidence men corrupt them. Radical doublespeak inflames them. And stupidity seems to multiply around them. Yet, one problem seems to serve as a herald—a lack of institutional credibility. Media before the online environment—newspaper, radio, television—all reached a rather high level of credibility in their journeys as purveyors of information in the eyes of the public. Yet, the new online media, especially the Web, have not been elevated to such an esteemed position, perhaps due to the above reasons, but this general lack of credibility problematizes them as persuasive media.

Traditionally connected to our notion of credibility is the very ancient, but still potent, concept of ethos. This very versatile concept has its roots
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in ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric, and it has evolved from meaning a habit of animals to gather in familiar places to the habits of men to act in familiar ways to more simply habits of human character. When these habits of character are perceived favorable by the community, one is said to have positive ethos, and, thus, some level of credibility from which to speak on matters of importance. Without ethos, no degree of logic or passion would be enough to persuade. Therefore, ethos had a special place in the philosophies of persuasion in the ancient Greek world and beyond. This chapter theorizes on the nature of ethos and how the online medium has complicated—or perhaps freed us from—our traditional understanding of it. Following this discussion, we will explore a basic model of online ethos that can be used to assess online ethos-based appeals.

GREEK AND ROMAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER

The Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions serve as important touchstones for our discussion of credibility and character. Aristotle is probably one of the most systematic thinkers in this area, but even he has been shadowed by others. Homer, in the *Iliad*, was the first to offer a basic account of character. While Homer did not develop such an explicit theory of ethos, we can speculate on what traits of character were esteemed in pre-Aristotelian times by carefully reading the stories of his protagonists and antagonists. Homer (trans. 1939) stated in the *Iliad*, for example, that King Nestor was “that grand old man whose counsel was always thought the best. He spoke with honesty and good courage setting out his thoughts neat and clear, like a weaver weaving a pattern upon his loom” (p. 104). Homer suggested in the *Iliad*, for instance, that character is highly valued and fully realized in public contest. We know Nestor best when he is giving advice, in moments of *agon*, to kings and warriors about the war and to Achilles when arguing with Agamemnon or slaughtering soldiers on the battlefield. The Homeric character exuded wisdom, courage, style or eloquence, patience, foresight, bravery, skill, circumspection, honesty, and graciousness, always during times of conflict.

Homer’s focus on character as an element in persuasion was an anchor for more advanced conceptualizations of ethos found centuries later. His version of character, according to Rowe (1983), centered “on the demands of the individual rather than on those of society in the broad sense” (p. 269) and assumed that the man of good character is good insofar as he is useful. As Yamagata (1994) has put it: “a man useful in battle is a good man” (p. 222). Yet, a positive character is an ends, not a means or a rhetorical tool that is explicitly used to gain power or prestige. Homer’s notion of character assumed as important that which Aristotle explicitly excluded—the idea of prior action and reputation. According to Homer’s proto-theory of character, there is an impact on a man’s ability to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to be regarded as worth attending to, by his reputation for wisdom, or perhaps solely of his age precisely because it is perceived as a sign of wisdom, sagacity, “fair-mindedness,” and good counsel.

While Homer wrote about practical skill, Plato spoke of ideals to characterize men of credibility. Plato illustrated his theory of character in his dialogues about dialectic, linking the good rhetor with philosophical rigor and a love for the audience. DuBois (1991) argued that Plato’s notion of dialectic, Plato’s tool for truth, is not unlike torture and can be used to test the character of men: “Philosophy becomes a method of arrest and discipline; philosophical argument is a dividing, a splitting, a fracturing of the logical body, a process that resembles torture” (p. 113). Plato (trans. 1925) wrote in his *Sophist*, “so we have the great man’s testimony, and the best way to obtain a confession of the truth may be to put the statement itself to a mild degree of torture” (237b). Plato then wrote, “let us examine the opinion-imitator as if he were a