



Review of *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web* by Barbara Warnick (2007)

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Overview

In *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web*, Barbara Warnick seeks to map new research agendas for rhetorical understanding and criticism of online public discourse. Warnick offers a well-grounded melding of media theory and rhetorical criticism, thus enlivening both fields. She also seeks to remedy what she contends is an oversight in rhetorical scholarship, namely a lack of detailed case study examinations of public discourse in Web environments.

As I explain below in my overviews of individual chapters, *Rhetoric Online* is an important and useful book, one especially valuable to scholars who examine the interplay of rhetoric and technology, such as readers of *Kairos*.

Chapter 1-The Internet and the Public Sphere

The World Wide Web is a space where the many wonderful—and hideous—potentials inherent in human persuasion are performed daily. While the pervasiveness of mediated communication has led many to sing dirges that could be entitled, "Democratic Public Sphere: Rest in Peace," Warnick seeks to take seriously the possibilities that the Web offers for public discourse, including affordability, access to mass audiences, transformation of hierarchies such as authority and authorship, and interactivity. As Warnick puts it, "critics should not look to the communication platform or its features as *per se* good or bad when making attributions about how its use affects society. Instead, they should consider how the Web's affordances are shaped and applied by users to address social problems" before judging the Web's effect on public discourse (22).

Following the work of scholars such as James Carey and Susan Herring, Warnick argues that the Web represents a shift or qualitative difference from older forms of media such as print or broadcast television. Among the features of this shift are changes in reading practices brought about by the shorter lexia and intertextuality of hypertext, a rise in the relative persuasive force of images as compared to text, and multimodal persuasion.

Though readers of *Kairos* will not be surprised by a claim that the Web is qualitatively different from older media, Warnick uses the claim as an occasion to call for scholars in rhetoric to adapt their theories and methods to more fully account for the implications of that claim. Toward that end, Warnick calls for more case studies of online political mobilization and more "rhetorical criticism of positive instances of the use of new media technologies," an area of criticism that she characterizes as "noticeably under-researched," particularly by those in her home discipline of Communication (19).

Warnick offers several possible reasons why rhetorical critics have not yet examined Web-based persuasion and political action fully. First, Web-based persuasion often does not fit

the paradigm of political rhetoric as "sustained speech and oratory" and thus makes a poor match with the types of artifacts that many critics are trained to analyze. Second, the digital divide that starkly separated the rhetorical haves and have-nots in the early days of the Web may have led some to consider the Web as dominated by elites and therefore less fruitful to study than it might otherwise have been.¹ Third, 1990s-era utopianism about the Web's transformative power may well have met with a backlash of academic skepticism. Finally, Web-based rhetorical artifacts are ephemeral and, even when they are captured for analysis, features such as animation, images, and links may not appear or behave as they would on a live page.

Nevertheless, because the Web has provided a robust and effective means for shaping political discourse, Warnick would have scholars take the Web seriously on its own terms, adapt their theories and methods, and rise to the challenges of refiguring what counts as a "text" worthy of preservation and analysis. Though these are big challenges, Warnick offers a way into them through the approach of media-specific analysis, an approach that forms the basis of Chapter 2.

Chapter 2-Online Rhetoric: A Medium Theory Approach

In this chapter, Warnick unpacks the theoretical grounding for the chapters that follow, each of which builds on the foundation she lays here. That foundation combines a broad Burkean definition of rhetoric as language used to induce cooperation among human beings with a media theory approach that is sensitive to the characteristics of the Web as qualitatively different from older media (25). The particular characteristics of the Web on which Warnick focuses are "nonlinearity, differential access, instability, and dispersion" as manifested in five parts of the communication process: "reception, source, message, time, and space" (27).

Warnick contends that these characteristics affect how persuasion on the Web is created, perceived, and responded to; as a result, it is only through a robust understanding of all of these vectors that rhetorical theory and criticism can best analyze Web-based public discourse.

Reception

While there are always exceptions, it is generally true that Western print conventions and audiences trained in those same conventions participate in a logic of linearity. Of course, one can open a book anywhere and read forward and backward from any page, but the intended and expected path is from a designated start to a designated finish. Although Web artifacts are often created and experienced using the conventions of print, the reading

¹ A digital divide still exists, even with the present explosion in the developed world of ever-cheaper basic computer hardware, robust open-source software, and easy means of authoring Web content. As Nielsen (2006) argues, the old digital divide segregated Web users on the basis of affordability; by contrast, the new divide segregates users on the bases of accessibility and empowerment (n.p.). Even though much of the population can get onto the Web, seniors and individuals with low literacy are shut out of much Web content because of its complexity (n.p.). Moreover, many Web users accept search results and default settings on their computers uncritically, and also rely on ad-supported Web services (n.p.) Thus, such users in effect allow others to decide how their attention will be directed (n.p.). Of course, in the developing world, where access to food, shelter, security, schooling, and infrastructure are poor, the new digital divide is still affected by the old. If anything, the evolving digital divide makes it even more crucial for rhetorical scholars to develop new ways of examining online rhetoric because potential audiences will continue to change as the Web's reach changes.

practices made possible (indeed, encouraged) by hypertext challenge linearity as the principle structuring design and reception.

The changes in reading practices that the Web brings forth, Warnick contends, mandate adaptations in rhetorical theory and criticism, which has typically used source- or text-based approaches that, while useful for many purposes, tend to pay relatively little attention to the audience's role in co-creating meaning. Users' opportunity to "talk back to" some Web texts, while never completely unfettered, creates (at least for sites that archive comments) the chance for rhetorical critics to engage in what Warnick calls "the grounded study of user reaction," a type of study that can reap dividends from reader-response criticism (32). Even when primary evidence of Web site audience response is not available, Warnick calls for an expansion in critical methods to account for "the ways in which the Web site text prestructures user response through placement of internal and external hyperlinks, intertextual allusions, opportunities to interact with on-site content, and [makes use of] recognizable cultural contexts and intertexts that shape the reader's interpretation" (32).

Source

One way in which audiences of Web-based rhetorical artifacts participate in co-creating meaning is by judging the *ethos* of the artifact and its source(s). This judgment is complicated by the fact that many websites give no indication of who created site content. Warnick cites a study of Web user comments finding that users judge site *ethos* by factors such as visual design and layout, information structure, and usefulness rather than by who wrote site content.

The Web is a communication environment that fosters collaborative authorship by teams. Indeed, many of the most-visited sites on the Web could not possibly be maintained by one person. For example, wikis such as Wikipedia are continually written, edited, and argued about by individuals all over the world. Moreover, variables such as modifiable templates or users' browser settings complicate who has control over the boundaries of authorship. For example, I adapted an open-source template to craft the webtext version of this review. In a sense, the individual who created that template and your particular browser settings are my co-authors.

Message

Drawing on Lev Manovich's work theorizing what makes new media "new," Warnick points out that Web texts are modular. They are made up of bits of code, images, media, hyperlinks, and other components. These components can in turn be altered and repurposed, such as I have altered and repurposed an open-source template for this review.

While repurposing media is not unique to the Web, the sheer abundance of raw materials available, the ease with which they may be manipulated, and the availability of software that allows one to peek behind the curtain to see (and tweak) code or alter images makes the Web a place where messages are fragmentable and infinitely repurposeable.

Time

Warnick contends that even though they are potentially aimed at large audiences, Web texts are not aimed at mass audiences in the same sense that broadcast television is. That is, Web texts are intended to be available any time a user wishes to access them. The user sets the schedule, not the identifiable authors or sponsors.

Time not only affects when a user experiences a Web text, it also affects how she does so. Variations in computer processing power and bandwidth can radically alter how the user experiences all the affordances (such as Flash animation, streaming audio and video, images) that a Web site might have to offer.

Time also—and this is the most important aspect of time from a researcher's perspective—affects the permanence of Web artifacts. Even the highly useful and ambitious Internet Archive (IA), which holds billions of pages, is essentially a storehouse of incremental snapshots of certain elements of pages, with second- and third-level links and content stored on other servers missing. Warnick explains that the effect of this kind of snapshot archiving is that rhetorical critics are hard-pressed to have available the dynamics of page use as they existed for users on the date of the snapshot. What's more, as I know from my own research, site owners can opt out of archiving by the IA, leaving critics to cobble together their own means of capturing site content and dynamics. As Warnick later puts it, "the challenges in archiving the political Web are nearly insuperable" (124).

For these reasons, Warnick calls for rhetorical critics to serve what amount to archival and recovery functions. By providing rich descriptions and analyses of ephemeral Web artifacts, at least much of the dynamism and importance of a Web-based rhetorical artifact can live on even if the artifact itself cannot be otherwise preserved. Feminist scholars reexamining the history of rhetoric have already shown the ample benefits of recovery and archival work for purposes of better understanding what counts as "rhetoric" and who counts as a rhetorician worthy of study. Warnick's call to action in the digital realm is no less important, and it may be more urgent. Manuscripts and historical evidence tend to be more durable than many Web artifacts.

Space

The last of the five parts of the communication process that Warnick examines in drawing qualitative distinctions between the Web and older media is space, in two related senses. First, the Web, through spatial metaphors such as "cyberspace," "Web site," "home page," "Web address," and others, is often imagined as a vast place in which the very real physical distances and cultural differences separating users are rendered secondary to a larger sense of community.

Second, as a result of the wide diversity of Web audiences, designers of Web artifacts must capture audience attention as soon as possible or the ever-wandering (note the metaphors) Web *surfer*, using his or her *browser*, will be soon off to other places. Warnick quotes Manovich here, arguing that: "if there is a new rhetoric or aesthetic possible [with the Web], it may have less to do with the ordering of time by a writer or orator, and more to do with spatial wandering" (qtd in Warnick 41). Warnick explains that Web authors are obliged to devote much of their efforts simply to capture the wanderer's attention and keep him or her involved long enough for persuasion to be possible. Indeed, in his recent *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, Richard Lanham argues that the Internet is "a pure case of an attention economy" (17). The competition in this space is for eyeballs, for eyeballs are the gateways to hearts and minds.

The Payoff

At the end of this chapter, Warnick outlines a methodological payoff for her extended discussion of how the Web has refigured reception, source, message, time, and space. First, site design and usability provide windows into understanding how Web texts appeal to audiences' heads, hearts, and guts, just as verbal style always has. Second, rhetorical

critics might focus on how Web texts construct their users' identities and values. On sites that archive user comments, the dialectic between this construction and how it is received and used by audiences can be fleshed out through primary evidence. Third, interactivity affects invention. While sustained linear argumentation is not a typical feature of most Web texts, users' attention can be sustained through affordances that allow customization of individual site experiences and through the heightened levels of intertextuality that hyperlinked content and multimodality provide.

Now that Warnick has argued for the importance of understanding the Web on its own terms, and outlined a medium theory approach that could invigorate rhetorical criticism of Web artifacts, she turns her attention in the next three chapters to showing such an approach in action through the kinds of case studies she calls advocates. In the next chapter, Chapter 3, Warnick uses Stephen Toulmin's concept of field dependency in argumentative knowledge-making to examine how users judge the credibility of online rhetorical artifacts.

Chapter 3-The Field Dependency of Online Credibility

The Web is vast. Any vast place where human beings gather and use language will house its share of hacks, charlatans, and bloviators. Because source credibility and reliability are crucial persuasive resources, and because it is often difficult or impossible to identify the author of many Web texts, how do audiences decide the crucial question of *ethos*?

To help answer this important question, Warnick turns to Stephen Toulmin's view of argument that sees argument dynamically, as a social activity. Toulmin wrote *The Uses of Argument* as a challenge to the view of reason embodied in the windless enclosures of formal logic, those geometric structures of implications that rarely have much to do with how human beings actually seek to make and justify reasons. Toulmin's jurisprudential approach to argument is, as Warnick puts it, "ordered and reasonable but at the same time [is] situated in fields of practice and knowledge production" (49).

Among Toulmin's contributions was his articulation of a model of argument that applies across knowledge fields, yet makes room for the reality that different fields judge arguments and evidence using standards particular to each field. In other words, what is credible within a field is determined by that field's situated participants.

Using this Toulminian approach, Warnick examines *ethos* within the field of Web-based political discourse. To do so, she relies on two studies examining how website users judge credibility. The first of these studies suggests that assessments of site credibility proceed in a three-stage process: First, users take in the overall design and layout, often making quick judgments about whether they want to explore the site further. Next, they examine site content (including what, if anything, the site reveals about its authors' identities and qualifications). Finally, they evaluate how site content matches their needs and existing knowledge.

The second of these studies suggests that users assess credibility on the basis of contexts. For example, users expect a site offering travel information to be emotionally engaging and topical while they expect a site offering medical information to give more indicia of source authority. One site is credible if chatty and slick; another is credible if sober and restrained.

Warnick then applies a field-dependent model of online credibility to analyze Indymedia, a popular website (really, a node that coordinates many other sites) that deliberately positions itself as outside the institutions and values of corporate-owned or government-controlled news outlets.

Indymedia encourages users all over the world to submit stories and makes it easy for users to do so through open copyright and editorial policies. Authors do not identify themselves, perhaps both because of the collaborative nature of the site and also because of fears of political repression. Indymedia has no home office or fixed editorial board.

So how do users judge the credibility of stories on Indymedia? Warnick examines an exchange of user comments following an Indymedia story about the FBI-involved shooting death of Ojeda Rios, a leader of the Puerto Rican independence movement. While some users called for evidence to support the story's argument that the FBI simply allowed Rios to bleed to death after shooting him, other users demanded evidence to substantiate the story's charges. Still others relied on the Indymedia principle of users having to be responsible for finding out facts for themselves, once stories made them aware of otherwise-unreported (or distortedly-reported) events.

Dissonance among individual users' reading practices, values, and expectations as demonstrated by the archived comments on the Rios story brought to the fore issues of authority, grounds, warrants, and what the responsibilities of the producers and consumers of news media should be. As Warnick's Indymedia case study establishes, "credibility" is a shorthand term for a series of judgments—judgments that are enmeshed in practices and values. As Warnick puts it, "The notion of field dependence can be shown to function very effectively as a mechanism for explaining how epistemological contexts and the evaluation standards that grow out of them play a role in online knowledge production practices" (67). Consequently, rhetorical critics should, when examining ethical appeals in online discourse, consider how the field in which those discourses participate judges credibility. This will provide a reasonable, yet flexible critical standard for the type of case studies Warnick urges.

The next of Warnick's case studies in Chapter 4 examines interactivity—the ability of users to affect the nature of their experiences with a given Web text.

Chapter 4-Interactivity: The Golden Fleece of the Internet

Warnick notes that while interactivity is important, there is surprisingly little agreement about what it is or where it resides. Is it in the media technology, the user's individual perceptions, or perhaps somewhere in the contexts of a rhetorical situation? To find a way through such questions and to set up a useful heuristic for this chapter's case studies of online political discourse in the 2004 presidential campaign, Warnick draws on Sally McMillan's tripartite typology of the forms of interactivity. In brief, McMillan's typology classifies interactivity as user-to-system (such as clicking on hyperlinks, adjusting displays), user-to-user (such as chat or comments on blogs), and user-to-document (such as voting in online polls, submitting questions to be answered, and contributing content).

With this three-part schema in place, Warnick examines how and why interactivity was used on two websites from opposite ends of the American political spectrum—MoveOn.org and GeorgeWBush.com—to persuade audiences during the 2004 presidential campaign.

No summary in a review can do justice to Warnick's close analysis of the different types of interactivity and the different contexts and purposes of these sites' uses of interactivity. In general, though, Warnick establishes that MoveOn.org (at least during the period of her study) blended all three types of interactivity by allowing site users to express their opinions about political issues, coordinate meetings and other activities to take place offline, and even to contribute site content such 30-second digital films with anti-Bush messages.

As for GeorgeWBush.com, Warnick demonstrates that interactivity was used for different purposes, purposes that contextualize the rhetorical uses of interactivity on the site. Bush was the incumbent president, with a well-financed campaign. Thus, his campaign had both the desire and the means to disseminate a focused political message and had no need to solicit content from amateurs. Users could engage in user-to-system interactivity by streaming the same campaign ads that aired on broadcast television and in user-to-user interactivity such as organizing volunteer campaign activities, using the site as a clearinghouse for information.

Warnick argues that interactivity as a persuasive event highlights the importance of understanding interactivity through the lens of Burke's view of persuasion as intimately connected with identification. The types of interactivity that a site affords bring audiences together around a common vision of their values and identities, both by celebrating what "We" stand for and attacking what "They" stand for. Warnick's careful readings of these two websites show that not only does interactivity have consequences for public political discourse, but also that rhetorical critics must develop critical heuristics that are sensitive to "the specific communication context and the constraints and demands" of the rhetorical situations in which Web artifacts are created (90).

Warnick's approach that examines two ideologically separate websites in a particular political context and historical moment offers a model for future rhetorical theory and criticism of interactivity as a persuasive resource, both among websites that are ideologically opposed and perhaps also among websites that are ideologically aligned but that take different approaches to their shared political goals.

In her next case studies in Chapter 5, Warnick moves on to examining the rhetorical implications of intertextuality in Web-based public discourse.

Chapter 5-Intertextuality and Web-Based Public Discourse

Intertextuality is, at its most basic level, an interplay among texts. How we understand and use texts depends on the texts we already know. After tracing a brief history of the concept of intertextuality, and arguing that, on the Web, "all utterances depend on and draw from other utterances, and every expression is shot through with other competing and conflicting voices," Warnick focuses on one species of intertextuality: parody (97). Simply put, without the contextual richness of intertextuality, a parody has no rhetorical or comedic effect. Imagine Dana Carvey's famous George H.W. Bush impression if you had never seen the real 41st U.S. president give a speech. Thus, parody is a particularly good path into an understanding of intertextuality.

Among Warnick's case studies are JibJab.com's wildly popular digital parody of the song "This Land" from the 2004 election cycle and a Benneton clothing spoof ad featured on the site of Adbusters Culturejammer Headquarters.

The JibJab "This Land" parody borrows the form and style of a well-known American song but changes the lyrics and depicts both candidates in an intentionally amateurish-looking cartoon style. In the changed lyrics and in the parody's images, the candidates sling accusations of presidential unfitness and general shortcomings back and forth. As Warnick explains, the accusations are intertextual in that they are drawn from each candidate's public foibles as well as the implications of each side's reductive attack ads. But for a high degree of intertextual knowledge already in place when the clip was circulated (including the original "This Land" song, campaign coverage and politicking surrounding the Bush vs. Kerry

election), the parody would never have succeeded in creating a persuasive message about the two candidates and the depressingly silly nature of much American political discourse, especially in election years.

Similarly, spoof ads on the Adbusters website depend on what Warnick characterizes as "the very high level of advertising saturation to which people are constantly exposed" (115). The spoof ad Warnick analyzes parodies Benneton's well-known "The United Colors of Benneton" ad series, a series that attempts to link Benneton clothing with values such as racial harmony, youth, and peace. The spoof ad, entitled "The True Colors of Benneton," features a corporate-looking 40s-ish White man wearing a dress shirt and tie, his mouth stuffed with a huge wad of cash. The parody appropriates the standard look and feel of a Benneton ad, thus reaping the benefit of audience knowledge. This subversion acts as a critique of the message that typically accompanies the Benneton look and feel—a standard message too facilely linking consumption of expensive clothing with doing good.

Warnick argues that the rhetorical payoff of intertextuality is that it involves the audience as a co-creator of meaning, similar to the Aristotelian concept of enthymematic persuasion. That the Web makes tracking down and understanding all aspects of intertextuality fairly easy means that persuasive public discourse can potentially draw on a larger range of intertextual references than ever before.

In the final chapter, Chapter 6, Warnick ties together the threads she developed in the other chapters and argues for adjustments to existing theories and practices in rhetorical criticism.

Chapter 6-Conclusion

In a brief concluding chapter, Warnick reminds readers that her aim was to show that persuasive public discourse on the Web is well-developed, has a wide reach, and can have real effects. The Web certainly has not subsumed all other means of persuasive discourse, but neither is it a bit player. The Web will repay systematic study by rhetorical scholars and critics, albeit after some refiguring of critical tools and methods. Warnick reiterates that selected scholarship in media theory, blended with a broad vision of what rhetoric is and how it functions, provides possibilities for this refiguring and briefly recaps her case studies from the earlier chapters.

Warnick argues that during the necessary refiguring of critical tools and methods, a long view is best. She likens the effects of the Web's "new media" disruptions of settled assumptions about writing and reading to Walter Ong's examination of the rise of the written word and its effects on ancient Greek oral communication. While media may change, human beings will never cease inventing, presenting, and shaping ideas and values. The challenge for scholars is to maintain the vitality of their methods in the face of innovations in human discursive environments. Warnick's book shows how such a challenge can indeed be met.

Assessment

Not only does *Rhetoric Online* provide the start of a well-grounded research agenda for analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of online political discourse, it also models what such a research agenda might offer, both in terms of critical studies and preservation of Web artifacts. Warnick provides pathways into a robust blending of rhetorical and new media theory that serves both disciplines well. Moreover, Warnick's lucid prose and judicious hand

in bringing in a well-chosen range of work in related disciplines mean that *Rhetoric Online* would make an excellent addition to course syllabi and qualifying examination lists.

If the book has a fault, perhaps it is this: I found myself wishing for more images to work hand in hand with Warnick's excellent descriptions and analyses of Web artifacts. Except for typical Toulmin diagrams in Chapter 3, the book contains just a few images. While permissions and layout constraints will always affect whether images are incorporated into books, I often wished for a well-chosen screenshot or other such illustration. This was especially true in Chapter 4 where Warnick discusses artifacts such as the Bush campaign website. The site's URL, now that the election is over, redirects to the Republican National Committee's home page. This of course underscores Warnick's cautions about the fleeting nature of Web-based rhetorical artifacts.

But the relative dearth of relevant images is a minor quibble indeed about an otherwise outstanding book. Readers of KAIROS will find *Rhetoric Online* an important and useful work, one that could well become a standard text in rhetoric and new media.

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Credits

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