



Rhetoric Online

The Politics of New Media

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SECOND EDITION

Preface

Since the first edition of *Rhetoric Online* appeared in 2007, consumers' uses of Internet-based technologies have become progressively more dispersed and varied.

In the 2010 midterm elections, for example, 73% of adult Internet users (representing 54% of all U.S. adults) went online to get news or information about the elections (Smith, "the Internet"). Furthermore, The Pew data indicated:

One quarter of all US adults (24%) got most of their news about the 2010 elections from the Internet, and the proportion of Americans who get most of their midterm election campaign news from the Internet has grown more than three-fold since the 2002 campaign. (Smith, "the Internet")

It is also significant that far more than in the 2006 midterm contests, online users took advantage of a wide variety of affordances, including social media and Twitter, to track developing political events and discuss public issues with others. In 2007, when the first edition of *Rhetoric Online* was published, Facebook had 20 million users and Twitter had approximately 350,000 accounts ("Number of Twitter Users"). Today, they have more than 500 million ("Timeline") and 200 million users, respectively (Shiels). The Pew data indicated that in 2010, "Ten percent of internet users ages 18–29 took part in online discussion groups, compared with 6% of 30–49 year olds and 5% of those ages 50 and up" (Smith, "How Americans").

In light of the ongoing changes in both the capacities and uses of Internet-based public political activity, we feel that it is important to track developments in online politics so as to better understand how the introduction of new media forms and practices has reshaped the functionality and effects of public communication in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Consequently, this edition of *Rhetoric Online* will consider the nature of the public sphere and the effects of online public discourse on users' responses to political developments generally (chapter 1). Furthermore, we will consider advances in new media technology as well as recent research in mass communication, critical cultural studies, and other fields. In doing this, we expect to provide a means for readers to recognize and understand the roles of online activity in people's understanding of and participation in major political and social issues.

To focus that discussion, we provide an extensive overview of the role of new media in the 2010 midterm elections, highlighting how the political context in the aftermath of a highly charged, highly mediated 2008 campaign contributed to particular uses of new media by candidates, voters, and the news media in 2010 (chapter 2). As part of that discussion, we emphasize the ways in which the interests of rhetorical theory and criticism might be productively applied to new media. It is particularly important to do this in light of substantial developments in the forms, uses, and access to online content that have developed since the first edition of this book was made available in 2007.

While in the early years of the Internet online interactivity was viewed as a relatively "new" concept, in the second decade of the twenty-first century interactivity has become ubiquitous, taking place in personal and major news-related blogs (chapter 3). It has become not only commonplace but essential in enabling proponents and opponents on various issues to refine their thinking through online discussion, deliberation, and mutual agreement. Interactivity has enabled people to develop ideas and become aware of aspects of many issues that are of interest to them in their personal and public lives.

Building on these notions of interactivity, we also consider a specific kind of new media text in an analysis of viral video (chapter 4). In focusing on viral video, we define the term to clarify what differentiates a "viral" video from one that is not, assess the role of memetics for understanding certain kinds of Web-based discourse, and discuss the importance of rhetorical uptake and circulation for analyzing these videos. We do so most extensively through a case study of Lady Gaga's YouTube video "A Message from Lady Gaga to the Senate" concerning Don't Ask Don't Tell legislation.

An interesting dimension of online campaign activity and commentary has also been extended in the form of intertextuality, or cross-reference between social con-

text, public events and developments, and the political scene. Intertextually developed content offers many opportunities for social commentary and public amusement, but it also raises public awareness of the missteps of public figures and their shortcomings through satire and parody (chapter 5). This sort of information serves to increase the public's knowledge of aspects of the political scene about which they might otherwise be unaware. Thus, intertextuality consistently plays a role in peoples' knowledge of and interest in political developments and events.

Because, in the time since the first edition of *Rhetoric Online*, social networking (and social media more broadly) has become central to much of what constitutes online activity, we offer some thoughts about how rhetoricians might examine a variety of political, commercial, private, and public texts that are mediated through these still-emerging technologies (chapter 6). By drawing on several venerable rhetorical concepts, such as Kenneth Burke's theory of identification and consubstantiality and Maurice Charland's constitutive rhetoric, we explore the possible ways in which social media might facilitate in the construction of certain audiences and identities. As part of this discussion, we also consider some of the limits of using traditional methods of rhetorical criticism for the analysis of new media.

While much of the book focuses on institutional and electoral politics and the role of new media therein, we also examine the significance of anti-institutional politics online through a discussion of politically motivated computer hacking, or hacktivism (chapter 7). We suggest that a case study of hacktivism offers insight into the complications facing anti-institutional politics on the Web, especially for critics interested in how protest might function differently in digital contexts. Considered in and against the history of radical protest movements and a context of recent legislation addressing cyber security, we discuss how both hacktivist activity and responses to it might be theorized through Paul Virilio's work on strategic presencing.

Our hope is that this book will provide a useful resource for enabling increased understanding of the roles played by online interactivity in shaping public knowledge and awareness of the forces engendered by debate, discussion, and deliberation in enriching public understanding of major cultural and political issues. The role of the Internet in this process is significant, and continued study of persuasive online communication by rhetorical critics and analysts is vital to its effective development and the public's potential to benefit from its use.

The production of this book would not have been possible without the assistance of many individuals who supported our work. These include the series editors and especially Bruce E. Gronbeck who provided encouragement, criticism, and advice throughout the development of the book, the staff at Peter Lang Publishing, and Peter Kracht, Editorial Director at the University of Pittsburgh Press, who

offered advice and assistance early in the project. We would also like to thank student researcher Georgette Elmes, who helped us with some of the research into social networking.

Barbara Warnick would like to acknowledge the contributions of her husband, Michael R. O'Connell, for supporting her work, both intellectually and as "technical advisor." David S. Heineman would like to acknowledge his wife, Brianne Heineman, and his two-year-old son, David James Heineman, for their support and encouragement throughout the writing process.