Rhetorical Criticism of Online Discourse

BRANDON JONES
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Since the conception of the Internet, researchers from many fields have been interested in its many possibilities; rhetorical critics and theorists, however, have shown relatively little interest in the Internet, and the discourse created on it, up until the early 90s. Internet discourse researchers, such as Barbara Warnick, Laura J. Gurak, and G.P. Landow, have spent the last twenty years developing the theories and methods necessary to criticize discourse on this medium. However, compared to the research on traditional rhetoric, which goes back almost 2000 years ago to the time of the Greeks, their research has barely scratched the surface of Internet rhetoric. Because of the lack of research into Internet rhetoric, not surprisingly, rhetorical criticism of Internet discourse hasn't become as mainstream as criticism of other, more traditional forms of discourse, such as political discourse.

So why is it that there has been relatively little research into this topic? Barbara Warnick, who is among the first to begin researching discourse on this medium, believes that one reason for the rhetorical critics' lack of early interest in the Internet might be because they believed that the "...critical work and critical theory will need to be changed to suit new communication environments..." ("Public Discourse" 73). G.P Landow, an early researcher of hypertext, explains that because of the way that hypertext is produced it is also read differently: "Unlike books, which contain physically isolated texts, hypertext emphasizes connections and relations, and in so doing, it changes the way the texts exist and the way we read them" (174). These differences lead to text, audience, and author dispersal, which have complicated the use of traditional methods of rhetorical criticism on Internet discourse (Warnick "Public Discourse" 73).

Theories for a New Rhetoric

The need for theories and methods of rhetorical criticism for Internet discourse was the driving force behind many of the earliest rhetorical theorists' and critics' research into this field. One fairly prominent idea for the development of rhetorical theories for Internet discourse is an analysis of discourse focused on the ethos of the author (Gurak, Mitra and Watts). Laura J. Gurak, one of the first to support this idea, believes that traditional rhetorical characteristics like ethos, pathos, and logos still can affect the persuasiveness of an argument in an online environment, despite the dispersal of authorship so prominent in online discourse. Of these characteristics, Gurak believes that ethos, in combination with delivery, is the most pertinent to online discussion: "...the content of any message is inherently interwoven with a certain character, or ethos, and this ethos is a powerful determinant of whether speakers and their messages are accepted by the audience" (84). In her book, *Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace,* Gurak details the online protests over the Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip, two of the earliest examples of large-scale online debate. What Gurak found was that certain texts (such as CSPR's petition and the "Seiler letter") were

posted over and over again throughout the online discussions over the two cases. According to Gurak, the reason these texts were used repeatedly was not solely because of their content, but because they had the "appropriate character and credibility to appeal to privacy advocates and other participants across the Internet" (85). Gurak uses this fact as a basis to support her belief that ethos is the most important characteristic of online discourse: "The dominance of certain texts in the debates illustrates the power of ethos in cyberspace and complicates the liberal model of online community by illustrating that 'truth' does not always prevail, especially in the highly specialized spaces of the Internet" (85).

Similar ideas about ethos are seen in the studies of Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts, both of whom argue that the analysis of discourse in cyberspace should be focused on the concept of voice, a concept very similar to ethos: "...the idea of voice...provides an alternative theoretical lens to consider how cybercommunities can and do operate within the discursive space of the Internet" (480). Mitra and Watts describe voice as the speaker's (or speakers') "authority" or "agency" (482). According to Mitra and Watts, the Internet breaks down the hierarchies of power found in traditional discourse, leaving the voice and the "eloquence" of it as the primary attributes for evaluation by the audience: "Using the metaphor of voice, along with the potential to flatten hierarchies of power on the Internet, it is possible to demonstrate that the reader must consider that the voice and its eloquence will be the key evaluative aspect in cyberspace" (493). One key difference between voice in online discourse and voice in more traditional forms of discourse is that electronic discourse is rarely ever comprised of just one voice, but rather many individual voices: "Communication on Internet sites gives play to many voices without assimilating them into a single voice...Web site authors [often] invite readers to contribute messages that they then post on their sites" (Warnick "New Media" 63).

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What Gurak, Mitra, Warnick, and Watts' studies, along with many others, have shown is that, although there are numerous differences between digital and traditional rhetoric (text, audience, and author dispersal are just a few of these differences), traditional methods of rhetorical criticism can and are being developed to suit digital discourse. What once seemed to many as an unlikely source for rhetorical activity is now believed by some to have the potential to change the way that rhetoric has been viewed for the last 2000 years. James P. Zappen, one of the most recent researchers into digital rhetoric, proposes not only a change to the way that traditional methods and theories of rhetorical criticism are used, but to the way that rhetoric is viewed in its entirety. He argues that "dialogue—conceived not as a mode of persuasion, but as a testing of one's own ideas, a contesting of others' ideas, and a collaborative creating of ideas—is possible in any medium: oral, print, digital" (321). Warnick, Gurak, and many of the others I have mentioned have shown with their research that the Internet can indeed have a significant impact on traditional views of rhetoric.

Characteristics and Patterns of Online Discourse

In addition to their primary goal of developing the methods and theories required to rhetorically criticize online discourse, many of the aforementioned researchers also detailed in their studies some of the basic characteristics and patterns of online communication and the various constraints that affect discourse. Some characteristics of Internet discourse include speed, which, according to Gurak, "encourages an oral and casual style, but it also encourages redundant

and repetitive postings"; anonymity, which complicates the notion of authorship and encourages "flaming" (a strongly emotional and personal attack against another); and reach, which allows for interaction with a variety of people with varying cultures (qtd. in Zappen 321). Other characteristics, which I mentioned earlier, are text, author, and audience dispersal.

Several patterns of online discourse, which were noted by Barbara Warnick, include lack of desire to distinguish between reality and the virtual world, which Warnick claims is a result of "…the nature of the medium itself…" ("Public Discourse" 80); group conformity and pressure to conform to the group's values (Gurak observed in her own studies that "in some of these discussions there was no 'other side' to be weighed, because individuals who held the minority position were not comfortable challenging the dominant ethos of the…community") (qtd. in Warnick "Public Discourse" 81); and "technological elitism," which, according to Warnick, results in a sort of hierarchy that the Internet is normally void of ("Public Discourse" 81). These characteristics and patterns will be useful to me in my own research into digital discourse.

Conclusions on Past Research

Although the studies performed by each of the aforementioned researchers have provided a good starting point for rhetorical critics and theorists, between them they have only provided a few small examples of rhetorical criticism of digital discourse. The Internet contains an abundance of diverse communities, each with their own unique communication styles. The critical theories and work of traditional rhetorical criticism have been developing since the conception of rhetoric several millennia ago, while researchers have only been studying digital rhetoric for about twenty years now. Because of this comparatively small amount of research, I believe that more research in some of the different online communities out there will be needed to develop a fully refined theory of digital rhetoric. Although I know full well that I would never be able study each of the millions of online communities in the world, I hope that by performing my own rhetorical study on just one of these unique communities I will be able to help contribute to the research into Internet discourse and rhetoric.

Primary Research - Methods

For my research, I wanted to focus primarily on testing the claims of some of the digital rhetoric researchers that came before me, particularly Gurak, Mitra, Watts, and Zappen. I had decided that the best place to analyze rhetoric on the Internet would be in an online forum, being that they are both extremely prominent on the Internet and full of countless examples of digital text. The first step of my research was to choose the online forum whose texts I would be analyzing. I originally planned to examine various texts from multiple forums and then compare them to one another, but due to time constraints I decided to analyze texts from just one forum. The forum I decided to examine was the Starcraft II community forums on battle.net. There are several reasons I decided on this forum; one being because I had some familiarity with the forum, the second, and most important, reason being that the posters on the website are given publicly viewable ranks based on their performance in the game that the website is centered around. I believe that these ranks might be seen as a source of credibility for the posters on the forum and that this credibility would contribute to the overall ethos of the poster. I decided that I could then compare the ranks of thread authors on the forum to the successfulness of their thread in order to determine what effects, if any, that credibility/ethos has in this online community. Another notable characteristic of this forum is that the players are grouped into one of three groups—Terran, Protoss, and Zerg. This is also publicly viewable. I believe that this artificial grouping within the community will have some impact on the way that texts are received by their audience on the forum.

In order to determine the effects of ethos on the texts of this forum, I would need numerous threads from authors of various ranks. I had originally wanted to collect a total of twenty threads using a random method of selection but due to time constraints and an unexpected discovery about the content of the threads on the forum (I will discuss this in my results section), I decided that the best approach would be to subjectively select approximately ten threads to analyze. In addition to the ten individual threads I would be examining, I also decided to do a macro level analysis of the forum as a whole. To do this I looked at the first page of each of the three discussion sections (first two pages of the General Discussion section) on the forum and sorted the threads into the following categories: argument, entertainment, gloating, inquiries, complaints/rants, commenting (statements without a noticeable argument), and strategy (related to the game). After this I began to examine individual threads and collect various data from each of them.

I started off collecting data I could use to determine the effects of ethos/credibility on the forum (see Appendix A for the data table I used). That data includes: author's rank, the number of replies to the thread, and various other data pertaining to those replies—such as whether they were positive (agree at least partially with author), negative (disagree with the author), or neutral (either off topic or doesn't clearly agree or disagree) and what group the repliers belong to. To test for the effects of delivery, I rated the author on their grammar (1 bad – 5 good). In addition to testing the claims of some of the previous researchers of this topic, I was also hoping that by collecting a variety of miscellaneous data from the forum that I might be able to make some discoveries of my own. Some of the other data that I collected includes the length of the author's original post, the number of views it received, the location of the thread (which section it was posted under), the number of unique posters, the number of subsequent posts by the author, the group of the author, and the number of times the author was "flamed" (viciously insulted). After I had finished collecting data from each of the threads I had examined and from the forum as a whole, I began to sort the data in different ways in an attempt to discover correlations between various sets of data.

Results and Discussion

The first major, and somewhat surprising, finding that I made was from my analysis of the entire forum. Out of the three sections of the forum I examined (185 threads total), only 27% of threads were actually trying to make an argument. The other 73% of the threads consisted mostly of complaints/rants (mindless complaints with no suggestions for change—about 10%), questions related to community issues (22%), entertainment (such as jokes and links to videos—14%), and other

miscellaneous threads about the community and the game that it revolves around. What this shows is that much of the communication that takes place on this particular forum does not revolve around persuasion. I believe that these results support Zappen's view of rhetoric as something more than just a mode of persuasion.
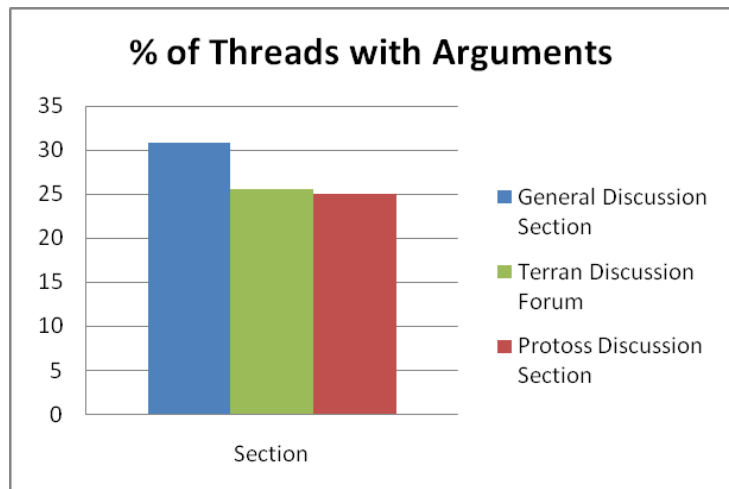
My next finding was on the correlation between the author's rank and the effectiveness of his or her post. What I consider an "effective" post is one with a high amount of positive replies and a low number of negative replies. Because of Gurak, Mitra, and Watts' theories revolving around the importance of ethos, I had originally expected the higher-ranking authors to have a significantly higher number of positive replies and far fewer negative replies. This, however, was not the case. Although the higher-ranking authors did have a higher number of positive replies on average, they also had a significantly higher amount of negative replies than the lower-ranking authors. At first these findings seem to contradict Gurak's theory on the dominance of ethos in cyberspace; however, I believe that there is an explanation for this occurrence. As shown above, low ranking authors received far more neutral responses to their posts than the higher ranking authors; in addition to this, the high ranking authors also received, on average, almost twice as many replies as the low ranking authors (an average of 33 replies for high ranked authors, 18 for low ranked authors). What I believe these statistics imply is that responders tend to be more critical of

authors with higher ranks and tend to take the lower ranking authors less seriously. In light of this information, I do believe that Gurak (along with Mitra and Watts) was right about ethos being the dominant rhetorical characteristic in cyberspace. As for the other traditional rhetorical characteristics, pathos and logos, there was not any significant difference between authors who relied on logic in their arguments and those who made more emotional arguments.

Although not in the least bit surprising, it is worth noting that, on average, about 80% of the positive replies an author received were from members of the same group and that about 80% of the negative replies were from members of different groups (see Appendix B). Another minor discovery that I made is that grammar didn't seem to have any effect on the number of positive or negative replies an author's thread received; however, this may be due to a flaw in my method, which, admittedly, was a tad too subjective (I had no systematic method of differentiating between good and bad grammar). Unfortunately, because of this flaw in my methodology, I was unable to come to any conclusions about the effects of delivery on the Internet.

Before I conclude, I would like to address some of the other flaws and limitations of my research methods. Perhaps the biggest limitation to my research is the sample size I collected. On the forum I examined there are thousands (if not tens of thousands) of threads. By closely examining only ten, it is entirely possible that the threads I examined were oddities among the more typical threads on the forum. I tried to adjust for this problem by performing a more broad examination of the forum. By knowing that only a small portion of the threads were actually arguments, I believe that my small sample size seems a little more significant. The last noteworthy
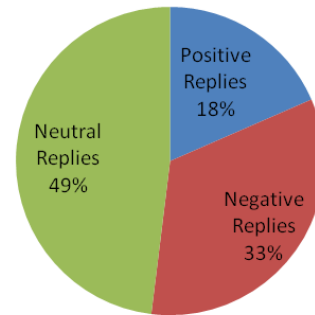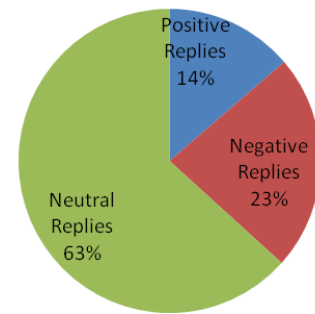
flaw that I see with my research is that I did not analyze threads a consistent time after creation. The threads I examined ranged anywhere from several hours to a few days old. The amount of time that people had to respond to a thread might have had some impact on the type of responses they were receiving. In an attempt to avoid this problem, I only analyzed threads that had not been posted on within an hour of my examination time. Although there were some fairly significant flaws in my research, I do believe that, because of the steps I took to mitigate their effects, I was able to keep my results from being corrupted to a significant level.

Conclusion

What my findings have shown is that much of what other researchers have discovered about communication in online environments is true. Although the arguments of authors with stronger, more credible ethos were not vastly more successful than others, they did command much more attention than that of lower-ranking authors. What I believe is the most significant finding of my research is the fact that only a small portion of the discussions taking place on the forum I examined revolved around persuasion. I believe that Zappen is correct in believing that rhetoric must evolve to include more than just persuasion; this is especially true if critics and theorists truly wish to adapt their theories of rhetoric for the Internet. For further investigation into rhetoric on the Internet, I believe that the best topic to focus on is the specific ways in which large groups of individuals communicate with one another.

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APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION TABLE

The following are the tables I used for collecting/sorting data.

Thread Name	Rank	Length	Location	Group	Unique Posters	Author Posts	Views
"Getting Losses Back"	Plat	108	General D.	Protoss	14	??	
"To replace Collosus...	Bronze	237	Protoss	Zerg	12		85
"Toss the race that presses 2 buttons and win"	Diamond	379	General D.	Terran	24		115
"Nerf 6 Pool"	Master	29	Protoss	Protoss	33	24	348
"Zealot armor"	Master	112	Protoss	Terran	10	1	113
"Fix for neural parasite"	Gold	44	Zerg	Zerg	7	0	76
"WTF is it with Colli?"	Silver	175	General D.	Protoss	29	1	207
"The Fleet Beacon"	Diamond	143	General D.	Protoss	18	1	123
"Hey Blizzard - two units > all armies"	Gold	13	General D.	Terran	27	n/a	186
"Zerg need buff and more Units"	Silver	296	General D.	zerg	6	2	39

| Thread Name | # of Replies | | | (+)Replies(reposts removed) | | |
	From Same Group	From Dif. Group	Total	From Same Gr	From Dif. Group	Total
"Getting Losses Back"	7	14	21	1	2	3
"To replace Collosus...	1	13	14	0	1	1
"Toss the race that presses 2 buttons and win"	5	26	31	5	0	5
"Nerf 6 Pool"	62	13	75	10	1	11
"Zealot armor"	4	7	11	0	0	0
"Fix for neural parasite"	4	2	7	2	1	3
"WTF is it with Colli?"	11	18	33	3	1	4
"The Fleet Beacon"	10	17	27	3	0	3
"Hey Blizzard - two units > all armies"	5	24	29	0	0	0
"Zerg need buff and more Units"	2	4	6	0	0	0

Thread Name	(-)Replies			Neutral Replies	Flaming	Grammar(:	Creation Date
	From Same Group	From Dif. Group	Total				
"Getting Losses Back"	2	3	5	6		5	6-Apr
"To replace Collosus...	1	2	3	5	1	4	4/6/2011
"Toss the race that presses 2 buttons and win"	0	14	14	5	0	5	4/7/2011
"Nerf 6 Pool"	4	3	7	15	0	5	4/4/2011
"Zealot armor"	0	3	3	7	0	4	4/9/2011
"Fix for neural parasite"	2	1	3	1	0	2	4/10/2011
"WTF is it with Colli?"	0	4	4	21	0	3	4/10/2011
"The Fleet Beacon"	0	4	4	11	0	4	4/11/2011
"Hey Blizzard - two units > all armies"	0	3	3	24	3	3	4/11/2011
"Zerg need buff and more Units"	0	1	1	5	0	4	4/10/2011

General Discussion Forum										
Argument	Entertainment	Brag	Comment	Bug/issue	Inquiry	Complaint	Rant/troll	Strategy	Total	% of argrument
29	18		5	4	31	4	2	1	94	30.85106383
Protoss Discussion Forum										
11	6	2	1		6	1	5	14	44	25
Terran Discussion Forum										
12	3	1	5		4	3	2	18	47	25.53191489
								AVG.:		27.12765957

Links

"Getting Losses Back": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2353276627
"To replace the Colossus with the Reaver": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2353267041
"Toss the race that...": this thread was deleted for inappropriate content after analysis
"Nerf 6 pool": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2351685355
"Zealot armor": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369738450
"Fix for Neural Parasite": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369738614
"WTF is it with Colli?" http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369738121
"Fleet Beacon": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369919261
"Hey blizzard...": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369879066
"Zerg need buff and more units": http://us.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/2369678827

APPENDIX B: RESULT TABLES

This table shows the results I received from comparing various sets of data from the previous tables; nothing important was found regarding the response-view ratio.

Percentage of Positive posters	Percentage of Negative Posters	Response-View Ratio(respnoses/views)	Responder-viewer Ratio(posters/views)	Percentage of Neutral Replies
21.42857143	35.71428571			42.85714286
8.333333333	25	16.47058824	14.11764706	41.66666667
20.83333333	58.33333333	26.95652174	20.86956522	20.83333333
33.33333333	21.21212121	21.55172414	9.482758621	45.45454545
0	30	9.734513274	8.849557522	70
42.85714286	42.85714286	9.210526316	9.210526316	14.28571429
13.79310345	13.79310345	15.94202899	14.00966184	72.4137931
16.66666667	22.22222222	21.95121951	14.63414634	61.11111111
0	11.11111111	15.59139785	14.51612903	88.88888889
0	16.66666667	15.38461538	15.38461538	83.33333333
			Average:	49.16768446

High rank = Master, Diamond, and Platinum

Low rank = Bronze, Silver, and Gold

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
H-Rank	18.45238095	33.4963925	48.05122655
L-Rank	14.99671593	21.88560482	63.11767926