

# Chapter 2. A Confusion of Messages: The Critical Role of Rhetoric in the Information Age

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## The Latest Shiny Object

Chatter fills the airwaves about the latest technology: the e-reader, tablet, web TV, smart phone. Almost every day companies introduce some new hardware to bewilder carbon man. On top of that, platforms and applications multiply daily. Do you want to tweet, blog, text, podcast, webcast, Skype? Do you need an app to tell you how much you slept? To help you plan your Christmas shopping? *The Economist* magazine recently devoted 20 pages of prime real estate in the center of the magazine to a special report on personal technology titled “Beyond the PC.” Nineteen of those pages discussed hardware and software innovations (Giles). A *New York Times* article tracked new digital gadgets just for children (Schmidt). Consumers want to know what is next. They are like crows swooping down on the latest shiny object to line their nests. Maybe it’s time to be more concerned about the actual information we are receiving rather than the way in which we get it.

Until fairly recently, people got information from a limited number of sources—newspapers, radio, TV or books; today we access media from a multitude of sources. Much of what we find is unfiltered or hyped. Do students today, some of the heaviest users of technology, know how to evaluate information or analyze it? Do they know how to decide who or what is credible? Do they even know what questions to ask to make these kinds of judgments? It is time for anyone teaching in the field of higher education to find ways to incorporate basic principles of rhetoric into their teaching. Students in every discipline, from biology to political science to business, are using technology to access information and using that information in their research and writing. The ancient art of rhetoric, defined here as the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication, can provide the tools students need today to become savvy, responsible digital consumers. It is not a new role for rhetoric, but as the field of journalism morphs and technology proliferates, it is an increasingly critical role.

Several phenomena are affecting what we see and hear today. First is the speed at which we are receiving and disseminating information due to ever faster hardware; the ubiquity of personal technology; and the multiplicity of forms of connection, especially social media. This speed affects everything from politics to

the arts. A few years ago, through tweets, texts, and video, we were able to see events unfold in Tahrir Square, Egypt, as they happened. Half a world away, in real time, we saw a man gunned down and a journalist beaten. A few days later we saw people cheering and embracing as President Mubarek resigned. Much of what we saw came over smartphones from nontraditional media sources such as Twitter and YouTube. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center poll, "About 63% of Facebook and Twitter users say that they use those social media platforms as a major source for news about events and issues not involving friends and family." The poll also found that news-related use of social media was up 50% from two years before (Arlen).

Speed is also a significant factor in multiplying the power of word of mouth. The volume of tweets about a movie, for example, can help predict the opening weekend box office performance (Wasow et al.). A YouTube video can bring instant fame. In 2009, Susan Boyle, an unknown, middle-aged singer from a Scottish village became an overnight sensation around the world when her YouTube broadcast went viral. In a matter of two weeks in 2012, South Korean rapper PSY's "Gangnam Style" became the most-viewed video on YouTube, garnering 834 million viewers. The Facebook site of Grumpy Cat, started in 2012, had almost 9 million likes by 2016.

A second phenomenon is the hyping of news. TV networks competing with cable stations for viewers promote controversy and feed on disaster, streaming video 24/7. For instance, every scrap of news worthwhile or not about Jared Loughner, the Tucson shooter who gunned down six people in 2010, made its way to cable news. Reporters interviewed his high school math teacher. Television stations played a video he had made walking the halls of the community college. Hying the news not only stirs controversy, but it promotes alarmism and can lead to less-than-reasoned responses, for example the U.S. invasion of Iraq following 9/11.

Media outlets also hype the news by hosting guests with diametrically opposed views just so they will argue about an issue. The stronger the disagreement the better, and if the guests don't argue, at least they can present opposing points of view. Giving equal time to both sides of an issue, for example the causes of climate change, with no objective analysis, leaves the audience with a distorted view of reality. This can have wide-reaching effects, for example, in the case of climate change, undercutting public support for environmental protections. This kind of debate also leads to dichotomous thinking that oversimplifies issues into two sides when in actuality there may be many points of view.

Journalists have traditionally served as middlemen, providing context for news in order to avoid oversimplification. They developed specialties and were responsible for making sure that information was presented ethically, that facts were checked, that sources were verified, that the whole picture was accurate and the coverage fair. The process of putting together a newspaper required creating a hierarchy for news and deciding who should be given a platform, usually

someone with the credentials to speak about a subject: a title, a degree, experience. *Front Page*, the 2011 documentary about The New York Times, showed the newspaper's editor constantly challenging the reporter to make sure he had all the sources he needed to publish an article. Many newsrooms do not have the staff anymore to do this kind of careful checking.

A 2010 Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism report surveyed newspaper executives and broadcasters. It found that:

Among those who see values changing, there is a broad consensus about the direction—and it is primarily negative. When asked to explain what they mean, majorities of both groups appeared most worried about loosening standards (62% of newspaper executives and 67% among broadcasters), and the bulk of these responses referred to a decline in accuracy, a lessening of fact-checking, and more unsourced reporting. (“Survey of News Executives”)

That was followed by, and closely linked to, an emphasis on speed, mostly in a negative light. “I worry that journalistic standards are dropping in that blogging and celebrity gossip and Tweets are being confused with reporting and editing that passes a rigorous standard,” wrote one broadcast executive” (“Survey of News Executives”). Ed Wasserman, Washington and Lee Knight Professor of Journalism, referring to a “journalism of haste,” said, “Much of the problem seems to derive from enshrining speed as an operational priority. Newspaper staffs accustomed to meeting end-of-day deadlines are now running on round-the-clock Internet time, as if that were essential to their authority. Is it really?” In trying to scoop their competitors, CNN, Fox, the Associated Press, and the Boston Herald all reported inaccurately in April 2013 that an arrest had been made in the Boston bombing long before one had (Rieder). Errors due to over-eager reporting are all too common these days.

The Rupert Murdoch scandal that began unfolding in 2011 corroborated the Pew report's findings. Not only was there a loosening of standards in his British tabloid *News of the World*, but there was clear violation of the law: bribery, illegal wiretapping, theft. The culture of the paper was to get information in whatever way possible, and the more it fed the public salacious, titillating details, the more the public's appetite for this kind of reporting grew. Sadly, observers agreed that Murdoch's paper was far from the only one acquiring information by unethical or illegal means.

Not only is journalism failing to provide quality control in many cases, but technology is making it easier for any Tom, Dick or Harry, regardless of credibility, to get a message out to a huge number of people. For example, Terry Jones, a pastor of a 50-member church in Florida, could threaten to burn the Koran and have his message go out across the internet, causing international consternation. In the past, he might have gotten a mention in his local paper as an eccentric

crank. In 2011, Anders Breivik was able to post his 1500-page manifesto online for all the world to see before beginning his killing spree in Norway. Easier access to information certainly has its positive side also, and no one would suggest censoring the internet, but ease of access requires more sophistication, more critical awareness, on the part of the end receiver.

A third factor in the way that we receive information is our ability to personalize our news. With so many sources available, we don't ever have to hear an opinion different from our own. As the Pew study shows, many Americans are ensuring just that:

Just 12% of Republicans describe themselves as regular CNN viewers, and for MSNBC, with its lineup of liberal hosts, the figure is 6%. Back in 2002, the study says, Republicans were as likely to watch CNN (28%) as Fox News (25%). On the flip side, Democrats make up 21% of the Fox audience, 47% of CNN's and 53% of MSNBC's. (Kurtz)

Why does this matter? Because democracy depends on a free and open exchange of ideas, and a willingness to compromise. Hearing only one side, never having one's views challenged, hardens listeners against other views. The son of a friend, for example, is a staunch conservative who listens to Rush Limbaugh through his headphones all day at his job but insists this practice does not affect his judgment. Progressives are just as apt to only listen to progressive commentators. I believe this hardening of views is a strong factor in the gridlock that has made it so difficult for Congress to move forward in recent years.

Finally, the form in which the message reaches us shapes our perceptions. When people had to pick up a newspaper or watch the evening news to learn about world events, they were getting a fuller, more nuanced understanding than if they are scanning a Yahoo headline or a Twitter summary. These can give a person a false sense of being up on the news while he or she is only getting a boiled down, oversimplified version.

Children today are exposed to technology at a very early age. By the time they arrive at college, they are almost all technologically savvy, so we assume they know how to decode information. Not so, and having a college degree provides no guarantee either. Authors of the book *Academically Adrift* studied the increase in critical thinking and writing skills of 2300 students at 24 universities over the course of four years. More than a third showed no improvement. Fifty percent said they did not have a course in their previous semester that required a total of 20 pages of writing (Arum and Roksa). And we all know how many students read widely these days. The result is students with more access to information than ever before but less sophistication generally in interpreting it. This is crucial, not just in order to have an informed, responsible citizenship, but for the changing job market. In an editorial in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman said of today's leaner job market, "They are all looking for the same kind of people—people

who not only have the critical thinking skills to do the value-adding jobs that technology can't, but also people who can invent, adapt and reinvent their jobs every day, in a market that changes faster than ever" (A27).

One of the most important skills in decoding information is simply being able to identify main ideas. This is essential to critical thinking. Without this ability to recognize the heart of a message, a person can unconsciously appropriate the opinions of others, be manipulated by them, or misinterpret messages. Further, without the ability to formulate an arguable thesis or establish a clear focus, students will produce writing that lacks unity and fails to persuade. Add in multi-media and digital composing and the process becomes even more complicated.

An expert on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict said recently that the first step in any peace agreement is being clear about what the two sides disagree about. What is the issue? This is not an easy question. Practice is necessary for students to learn how to tease out the point at issue. Anyone who doubts this can ask a room full of students the main point of a reading and see how many different answers come up. Simply assigning reading does not cut it, but teaching this kind of basic rhetorical skill is within reach of any instructor willing to slow down and analyze how and what an author is doing.

No one is going to turn the clock back on technology or journalism. In fact, the changing nature of journalism and exponential growth of technology provide an opportunity, a kairotic moment if you will, for rhetoric. They heighten its importance and add new urgency to our role as teachers. Our students should know how to research, write, and document a paper. They should understand the mechanics of writing. These are all important, but I would argue that one of the most significant things we can teach them today is how to judge, evaluate, and interpret the overload of information available to them on a daily, moment-to-moment basis.

### How Not to Lose the Message: Three Basic Principles

The following very basic principles of rhetoric can be incorporated into a variety of courses, from freshman composition to media studies. I will discuss below the rationale for choosing each one and practical ways to incorporate them into the classroom:

- The connection between rhetoric and community
- The value of listening to and respecting multiple points of views
- The importance of questioning what we hear and read

#### *The Connection Between Rhetoric and Community*

Why does this matter? Because rhetoric only becomes relevant when students see themselves as part of something larger with responsibility to that something. After all, don't we find the roots of rhetoric in the ancient Greek assembly and citizens' desire to effect change? Students should understand that they are members

of a variety of communities, that issues arise out of those communities, that language both connects and divides people, and that they can effect change through their words. They should also learn to recognize language that manipulates and inflames rather than informs. Some of the following exercises can help students begin to see their relationship to the community in new ways:

- Community mapping: take a walk through the downtown area; observe resources, green spaces, ethnic and racial make-up, and types of businesses; ask about local concerns; report results in visual form to class.
- Incorporate service learning in order to help students understand the community better. I have begun requiring 20 hours of community service in many of my classes, including first-year writing. Student engagement in the community has been linked to student success and continued engagement upon graduation (Astin 259-261).
- Assign community-based learning projects in which students write for nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses, i.e. brochures, letters, websites, etc.
- Assign students to sit in at an open city meeting and report on issues discussed.

The following exercises can help students understand how language effects change:

- Look at rhetoric as a tool or technology for positive change: letters to editor, online petitions, blogs, websites, and how the mode affects the message.
- Find examples of the breakdown of civil discourse: hate speech, negative campaigning, nasty comments.
- Write letters, editorials, and proposals that argue for a specific change at the local level.
- Look at whose message is privileged in the media and why.
- Have students choose an important issue that they believe is not being discussed enough, then do speed dating in which students discuss their issues with successive partners.
- Do research on an issue related to their community service or the local community, such as teen pregnancy or homelessness. This research could be used to produce a report for the agency or for a community-based research paper.

### *The Value of Listening to and Respecting Multiple Points of Views*

We need to make sure students understand that issues are complex with more than pro and con positions, and that each issue has multiple stakeholders. Important issues need to be understood in their historical and social contexts and cannot be boiled down to a tweet or a Yahoo headline. Students need to be willing to leave their comfort zones to hear opinions that differ from their own. As UVA

Professor Mark Edmundson says in “Dwelling in Possibilities,” “For a student to be educated, she has to face brilliant antagonists. She has to encounter thinkers who see the world in different terms than she does.” The following exercises can help student identify a variety of positions and stakeholders for issues:

- Write an argument from one perspective, then write it from an alternative perspective. Neither should be pro or con.
- Do a case study in small groups. Each group chooses an issue currently in the news to investigate. They write a position paper as a group, then each person takes a different point of view from which to write an argument, for example 9/11 events have been omitted from many school curriculums because they are difficult to explain. Points of view could include a 9/11 survivor, a high school history teacher, and a first responder on 9/11.
- Assign liberal leaning students to listen to or read a media source that is generally considered conservative and conservative-leaning students one that is considered liberal. They should report on what issues were discussed and if they heard what they expected.
- Have students research a controversial issue. Have them discuss the issue in pairs where they practice dialogue—listening carefully and responding to one another’s ideas.
- Choose a current issue. Compare reports from a variety of media sources: newspaper, blogs, Tweets, YouTube.

*The Importance of Questioning What We Hear and Read,  
and the Value of Knowing What Questions to Ask*

Our country cannot afford to have citizens who assimilate information uncritically, but critical thinking does not come naturally. It needs to be taught. Students need to know what questions to ask; for example, they should be asking the source of information and how current, unbiased and accurate the information is. They need to be able to identify fallacies in arguments. They should ask what information has been left out or misinterpreted, i.e. how ethical an argument is. Students do not need to be experts on the subject to ask critical questions of all claims and beliefs, including their own. The following list can give students an idea of the questions they can ask:

- What is the issue?
- What is the purpose?
- What appeals is the author using: ethos, pathos, logos?
- How does the choice of words affect the message?
- What are the assumptions behind the arguments?
- How current is the data? How credible are the sources?
- Could the statistics be interpreted differently?
- What significant information has been omitted?

- Does the medium affect the message? Compare the same information coming via different platforms: email, Tweets, text, blogs, etc.

## Conclusion

The 2012 report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement said that “Civic learning that includes knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity to work with others on civic and societal challenges can help increase the number of informed, thoughtful, and public-minded citizens. . . . Civic learning should prepare students with knowledge and for action in our communities.”

As technology expands, media clutter will only increase. This is the one thing we can be sure of. There are many ways, however, no matter what we are teaching, to prepare students to be shrewd, critical consumers of information, to prepare them to not just be buffeted by the tides of the media, new and traditional, but when necessary to swim against the tide. The rhetorical concepts we teach, then, are an essential part of civic learning. They are tools students need to navigate in our media-saturated, digital age, surely a necessity for a responsible and engaged citizenship.

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