

Chapter 20

Digital Rhetoric and Globalization: A Convergence–Continuum Model

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ABSTRACT

Digital rhetoric has been discussed by many theorists as comprising a marked shift from ancient rhetoric's focus on persuasion. For some of the earlier theorists, digital rhetoric defined a novel relationship between literacy and the mechanics of text as computer-mediated communication and changed relationships between consuming, producing and engaging with discourse as information on a screen. Later digital rhetoricians argue different approaches and definitions that are more inclusive of the different types of discourse facilitated by multimodal, interactive, immersive, and computer-mediated communication as semantic discourse at the interface level and encoded through computer programming language, servers, and networks. This chapter focuses on the different modes of digital rhetoric in the context of globalization through a convergence-continuum model approach. The model presented approaches rhetoric and discourse from various levels as loosely based on the models of activity theory, multimodality intercultural theories of globalization and integrates them into a continuum model ranging from global, public modes to individual, personal digital rhetorical modes and practices. Instead of being prescriptive, this model is descriptive in recognizing the fluid natures of digital rhetorical interactions whereby global and local, public and private, group and individual, production and consumption, human and technological, physical and virtual and other discourse contexts merge.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF DIGITAL RHETORIC, KEY TERMS AND SCHOLARS

Continuous spectrum: an emission spectrum that consists of a continuum of wavelengths. (The Oxford English Dictionary)

The Spectrum: the entire range of wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation.

Convergence does not mean ultimate stability or unity. It operates as a constant force for unifica-

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tion but always in dynamic tension with change.... There is no immutable law of growing convergence; the process of change is more complicated than that (Ithiel de Sola Pool, Technologies of Freedom)

A cursory glance of the scholarship on digital rhetoric displays that no consensus exists on its definition and that staking out a definition of digital rhetoric is a difficult task due to the ever-changing nature of its object of study: the increasing convergence of human life and technology. In this introduction, I will introduce some of the key scholars involved in digital rhetoric and describe why digital rhetoric should not strive for a static definition. As a discipline or field of study, rhetoric itself is notable for its lack of a coherent definition. Considering that rhetoric itself has no universally agreed upon definition, it is not surprising that digital rhetoric has yet to gain a foothold or stable definition. If digital rhetoric comprises everything digital, whether this means a spectrum of actions performed within digital media or physical actions conveyed through digital media as human experience, it becomes difficult to speak of a definition that tries to capture these continuous pulsing signals and forms of energy that are a combination of human life and technology through various descriptive elements of movement, text, animation, music, symbolic, visual, aural, spatial, temporal and physical interaction and communication. Similarly, if we see computer interfaces as both a mirror and a window, as some scholars have suggested, we start to see the mimetic and autopoietic properties of a medium that mimics but also metastasizes and evolves alongside with us. Yet, in a similar way that rhetoric may be seen as a sort of meta-discipline that incorporates discourse, linguistics, and various forms of communication as well as techniques and principles of generating arguments and knowledge, this chapter argues that digital rhetoric can be seen as a meta-discipline that extends its focus on such a continuum of digital and technologically mediated human behavior and

actions. In other words, digital rhetoric studies the implications of how our use of technology impacts, reflects, represents, guides, and co/re/creates evolving forms of digital human action, behavior, communication, logic and knowledge.

This chapter will limit its focus on how digital rhetoric can study human language and computer language and how it can deal with the issue of mediation and human-computer co-creation in creating meaning and knowledge in computer-mediated communication processes. While we may now have a larger palette of digital technologies and interfaces for symbolic manipulation and meaning-making activities to create multimodal arguments through text, visuals, music, video, animations, and for capturing embodied, kinetic information, behind these digital technologies the programming languages of computers are busy passing their own arguments to help us create such arguments digitally, or, as is increasingly the case with the advent of artificial intelligence and data mining, making their own arguments to help inform humans about reality.

To give an example of how imbricated human life and technology are, in our everyday lives many of us rely (perhaps unwittingly) already on various computer technologies to inform us in making decisions, finding knowledge, and generally facilitating different types of understanding. In these contexts, human decisions are informed by how computational processes describe or mediate a particular context or reality to us, which are informed by programming techniques, algorithms, databases, platforms, interfaces and artificial intelligence and pattern matching in order to communicate information to us and with us. A common example of computation as persuasion can be given by the way global positioning systems (GPS) pass on weather information, re-route our driving destinations to avoid traffic congestion, or how recommender systems in e-commerce make estimated guesses on what may also be of interest to us based on tracking our prior buying behaviors. These are all representations of real-

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