

Cyber Rhetoric and Online Ethos

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INTRODUCTION

Online media often create new communication situations. That is, few formal rules govern cyberspace exchanges. For this reason, participants in online forums must often develop “rules of engagement” as they interact. Research in computer-mediated communication (CMC), however, reveals certain discourse trends—particularly related to establishing one’s credibility, or ethos—emerge in these online forums. Such trends might have important implications for how to communicate in the increasingly global environment of cyberspace.

BACKGROUND

Effective communication is often a factor of identity. If we know who someone is, we are more likely to consider the information that person has to present (vs. if a stranger presented the same ideas). Moreover, the identity individuals project—such as a professional appearance—can influence how we perceive the information they convey. Online media, however, greatly restrict notions of identity. In doing so, they also restrict factors of trust and credibility related to information exchanges.

Many researchers in CMC have examined how computer-based interaction can alter notions of identity. As both Sproull and Kiesler (1986) and Hiltz and Turoff (1993) note, communication via online media often reduces human interaction to typed words. Recipients of online messages, therefore, lack non-verbal cues (e.g., factors of physical appearance) related to the sender’s identity, so the sender generally seems faceless and anonymous (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Hiltz & Turoff, 1993).

This faceless dimension of online media allows individuals to make a first impression on their own terms. The relatively anonymous nature of online media also allows individuals to re-create who they are in an online exchange (VanGelder, 1990). In online occurrences of “gender-bending,” for example, men pretend to be women, women pretend to be men, heterosexuals pretend to be homosexuals and so forth. In fact, VanGelder (1990) mentions how one particular Usenet group, PEOPLE/LINK, uses this plasticity of identity as a selling point by telling potential clients they can become whomever or whatever they wish to be online.

In other cases, the anonymity of online interactions can even allow computer programs to masquerade as humans. Julia, one of the most successful of such programs, would search the Internet for various chat groups, and Julia’s programming allowed it to engage humans in discussions. In several cases, individuals interacting with Julia did not appear to think “she” was a machine (Turkle, 1995). In fact, when individuals did suspect Julia might be automated, the program used appeals to certain topics to convince skeptics it was a “real” person.

Other research in online communication has examined some of the potential detriments of such anonymity. Warnick (1998), for example, observes that the notion of authorship—the identity of who wrote a particular item—is often blurred by the re-posting of electronic messages. Warnick notes that when an individual encounters an online message, that individual may repost it to any number of persons. In reposting the message, individuals may cut or paste only portions of the original text (i.e., take items out of context) or modify the message by inserting or deleting text. This cut-and-paste factor allows individuals to separate what was said from the person who said it. The ability to separate posters from their original message, in turn, gives individuals a great deal of liberty. First, individuals can attribute segments of forwarded text to whomever they wish. They can also alter what another person wrote and thus create a new identity for that author by putting words in that person’s mouth. Finally, they can create new identities for themselves by co-opting the words or the ideas of another person.

Certain research in online communication notes that cutting and pasting segments of electronic messages is a common occurrence in some online forums. Baym (1997), for example, explains it is common practice for some list members she studied to cut and repost the message of another. While Baym does mention that such cutting and reposting maintains the integrity of the actual author, she does not discuss whether the name of the author is given, or if the post is simply forwarded blindly by other group members. These new communication conditions, however, have important implications for how individuals establish their credibility, or ethos, within virtual communities.

MAIN THRUST

The notion that the online environment removes nonverbal identity cues does not mean that identity, especially personality, vanishes. Rather, as Sproull and Faraj (1997) point out, the anonymous nature of online exchanges could allow one's personality to run free. Furthermore, in online environments, notions of personality and identity related to authority and credibility often take on new forms. As Fernback (1999) notes, the marks of status (marks that draw others to listen to you) in online exchanges are not "brawn, money or political clout," but rather "wit, and tenacity and intelligence" (p. 213). As Spears and Lea (1994) explain, these aspects of online ethos could occur even when individuals interact with someone in a position of greater authority or greater power within an organization. That is, managers and subordinates often use the same presentation style when interacting online, and thus remove many status cues outsiders might use to distinguish managers from subordinates. As a result, managers and subordinates may appear as equals in online exchanges. This factor permits subordinates to use online displays of wit, tenacity or intelligence to convince other parties that the subordinate is the more credible source of information on company policies than an actual manager.

Often, people's online presence, or ethos, is created by their ability to respond quickly to postings. This online ethos can be an important factor in determining whether opinions are heard or ignored in an online exchange. For this article, ethos is defined in terms of the notion of invention: The ethos of a presenter is something he or she creates in the course of a presentation—something that causes his or her audience to find that presenter worth listening to and believing (Aristotle, 1991). Essentially, ethos involves having a presence/authority that entices audiences to give an individual's opinions and ideas more weight and consideration than those of persons with less presence. An individual's online presence, thus, determines his or her online ethos.

Fernback's notion that humor and wit contribute to online ethos has been noted by researchers such as Baym (1997) and Warnick (1998). As both report, in online forums, individuals who respond quickly or wittily tend to be viewed more highly than those who are more passive. Over time, this use of quick and witty responses allows individuals to establish their online presence, or ethos. As an individual's online ethos grows, his or her opinions tend to be listened to more often and accepted more readily than those of persons who post less often or with less wit.

Additionally, individuals often attempt to establish their online ethos through ostentatious behavior, such as

bragging about their technical knowledge. In many cases, users display this knowledge in a way that sets them apart from and displays their scorn for participants who have less technical understanding. Warnick (1998), for example, notes one study in which more technically adept individuals used metaphors and disassociations to reveal their competence while creating an exclusionary and patronizing tone toward less technically adept participants in an online forum. Moreover, Baym (1997) reveals that individuals who display technical knowledge, especially if it brings information that can help others better evaluate ideas, can add to their ethos in online settings.

Ethos/credibility factors, however, tend to reflect cultural communication expectations (Kaplan, 2001; Woolever, 2001). Moreover, much of the foundational research concerning online ethos examines primarily United States (U.S.) interactions in cyberspace. For this reason, current understandings of online ethos could be culturally biased (St. Amant, 2002). As more of the world gets online, different cultural expectations related to ethos could cause confusion or miscommunication in international online exchanges (St. Amant, 2002).

The degree of international online access is increasing with amazing speed. In fact, the number of global Internet users grew by almost 2.8 million between June and July of 2004 (Active Internet users August, 2004). In Australia, for example, the number of Internet users grew by almost 400,000 between June and August of 2004 (Active Internet users July, 2004; Kerner, 2004), and the numbers of United Kingdom (UK), German and French Internet users grew by 721,000, 858,600 and 974,500 (respectively) between August and September of 2004 (Kerner, 2004). The total number of Japanese Internet users increased by almost 1 million between July and August of 2004 (Active Internet users July, 2004, August, 2004), while the number of Internet users in China grew from 2.1 million in 1999 to a projected 96 million by the end of 2004 (Wired China, 2000; China's coming, 2004), and online access in Brazil grew by 430,000 in recent months (Active Internet users August, 2004). International online access, moreover, will only continue to grow over time, and as more cultures gain access to cyberspace, online interactions will become increasingly intercultural in nature.

Different cultural groups, however, bring with them varying rhetorical expectations related to online exchanges. Such differences could affect perceptions of ethos in cross-cultural dialogs and could affect the success with which individuals participate in a greater global discourse involving online media. Research on U.S. interactions, for example, indicates individuals often use humor, wit and ostentatious behavior to create online ethos. Yet cultural groups can have different expectations of how these factors should be addressed. As Axtell (1999) points out, the kinds of humor individuals prefer can vary

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