

Jamerson Magwood

Dr. Jo Koster

WRIT 510

23 March 2006

“Are You On Facebook?” The Emergence of Digital Content and the Need for Reassessing and Restructuring Traditional Rhetoric

Students across the globe have started a new wave of communication on the internet. What began as a way to connect with students at a university has now changed to become a hub for connecting with students from various schools across the United States and even around the world. Online communities like Facebook are attractive to students, and the emergence of Facebook has initiated a multitude of relationships. But one problem remains; how do you explain the rhetorical features of Facebook with traditional tools of rhetorical analysis. As a theory, rhetoric explains language and the use of words to persuade the audience with the common model; the rhetor, or speaker, persuading an audience that assimilates the information. Rhetoric has changed in recent years with the emergence of electronic media and the internet. The “departments” or categories of traditional rhetoric cannot effectively explain the rhetorical and persuasive properties of electronic artifacts: websites, web pages, multimedia slides, or online and electronic publications. Content and appearance change rapidly in these kinds of text, and the tools for rhetorical criticism must be restructured so that its theories can explain and accurately assess content and information. This essay will demonstrate the limitations of traditional rhetoric by applying the traditional tools to Facebook, suggesting changes to rhetorical theory, so that all forms of electronic content will be assessed more accurately.

Facebook is the newest form of online community that allows college students (and now high school students) to create individual profiles. With recent updates to the system, university

faculty and students can now create profile pages because they only need a school email addresses to register and log into the network. The network on Facebook works as a hub because students can search through a host of profiles by keystrokes and mouse clicks. The Facebook network comprises of connections with not only students and faculty from their university, but also with students and faculty from different institutions. Students primarily use the free service, and they are able to connect with old high school friends as well as friends from different schools by searching them on the global network. Facebook is not only a search engine, but an interactive community.

Facebook possesses many interactive properties such as message boards and instant messaging, making it addictive to students. Elizabeth Daley asserts that interactivity works like the performative aspects of storytelling: “One ‘creates’ and ‘constructs’ media rather than writing it, and one ‘navigates’ and ‘explores’ media rather than reading it. The process is active, interactive, and often social, allowing for many angles of view” (36). Interactivity is a major appeal to Facebook account holders. These individual account holders can search different groups of Facebook users by searching through them alphanumerically or by group titles—for instance “Dr. Jones Walks On Water” or “PLSC 201.” Students can create groups that show the different interests they have from politics, birthdays, pop culture, television, music, and even their favorite faculty. An account holder can join, post messages to the group’s message boards, and search through other accounts. Every account allows the account holder to place information like favorite books, movies, and a little about me section for a general audience to read. Friends can write messages on each other’s *wall*, from little comments to random messages. Some account holders elect to leave wall messages that vent anger and others decide to leave comical messages. In addition to all these different interactive options, an account holder can send

messages like email to another account's inbox, much like forum-based online community. Some users choose to 'poke' people as an interactive ploy to grab a person's attention. Facebook states they have no idea what the option of "poking" actually does: "We have about as much of an idea as you do. We thought it would be fun to make a feature that had no real purpose and to see what happens from there. So mess around with it...because you're not getting an explanation from us" ("Facebook | Customer Support"). These different forms of interactivity on Facebook are important textual features of Facebook, but traditional rhetorical criticism cannot explain how and why students and even faculty are drawn to its sleek profile-like structure.

The traditional rhetorical criticism is important to understand in order to assess its applicability to new media texts. Traditional rhetoric has standards to ensure that the needs of the audience are met. The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade and consider the audience in discourse. Three different appeals describe the transaction of meaning with audience: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. These three appeals create the foundation of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. The rhetor's, or speaker's, establishment of his/her credibility is *ethos*. When the communicator establishes credibility, the audience is more likely to consider his/her argument. Effective rhetoric also employs *pathos*. When a rhetor uses emotions to appeal to an audience, sometimes through a story or highly emotional topic, the rhetor is essentially applying *pathos*. Finally, reasoning or rational thought demonstrated by a rhetor is *logos*. Criticism of *logos* accurately assesses the organization of the rhetor's argument. These three appeals are used to evaluate the rhetorical effectiveness of traditional texts.

As time progressed, more modern tools were added to rhetorical criticism, establishing the departments of rhetoric. *Invention*, *disposition*, *style*, *memory*, and *delivery* are components of a rhetorical argument. *Invention* explains the rhetor's ability to create and restructure his/her

argument for effect. The *disposition*, or arrangement, directly evaluates the organization of an argument. *Style* describes the presentation and effectiveness of words to persuade an audience. *Memory*, mostly used in critiquing oral texts, encompasses the combination of facts and related information to demonstrate the rhetor's ability to recall information to support argument. Finally, *delivery* assesses the way a rhetor presents or is able to capture the audience, and is usually the most important department in rhetoric. Students for many years have used these constructions to explain, evaluate, and effectively present persuasive arguments. However, digital media and the internet have changed the face of rhetoric. While they are still able to explain advertisements, combination graphics, and text, they do not accurately explain the fundamentals of what makes internet or electronic media effective. The audience has different expectations of the internet than of a magazine or book, in which alphabetic texts merely represent a traditional way of presenting information. With technology changing everyday, it is clear that rhetorical tools will have to be reworked to explain these modified perceptions of content. Now to assess the rhetorical artifact, so the limiting factors of rhetorical theory are visible.

Approaching Facebook or any other electronic artifact with traditional rhetoric implies that those artifacts have the same rhetorical purposes and aims. This assumption is false. Consider the structure for traditional rhetorical content; those same rhetorical strengths do not work for digital content. Books and magazines are alphabetic texts and electronic content could easily be described as hypertext. Reading a book is in so many ways different from reading information on a website or web page. The first element the eye catches is the length of paragraphs or blocks of text on a page. The eye is quick to digest information and to assess the page's contents—valuing information in small chunks—the same is prevalent on multimedia presentations. Would an audience value large blocks of text? No. When an audience reads a

book, the organization of the book is given up front via table of contents and the introduction. By scanning this information, the audience can predict what is important or know the structure and format before reading. Understanding the divergent issues and expectations the audience will have on a medium is crucial to knowing how traditional rhetoric is not fully equipped to explain and analyze online content.

But when evaluating Facebook as a traditional rhetorical artifact, traditional rhetoric assumes a very conservative interpretation of form and audience. The audience's needs must be considered. Given that the expectations of printed information and digital information are different, this is where the inconsistency begins. The gap between traditional rhetoric and Facebook grows when carefully looking at the departments. *Invention* describes the author's ability to create a strong and vibrant document—but look at the consistency. The template-based structure of Facebook has all the profiles looking similar. There is no variety, the kind of aspect many would expect with writing books. Some sentence variety and change in content demonstrates elaborate and critical thought on a subject in different areas. The interactive nature of Facebook that allows account holders to communicate and have record of friends is ingenious, but the interactivity makes it hard to read as a document. The argument or the stance of the author is important. In the case of Facebook, there is no argument. Each account is an individual representation of someone else's view, but not an affirmed point on a given argument. The accounts do not really establish a thesis or intent to prove a point, which does not work with traditional rhetoric standards.

Now *disposition* takes on a different approach to Facebook; as there is no argument it is not easy to assert the organization of information works well. First, the accounts all have set fields for information such as name, residence hall, favorite books, etc. Not all accounts use and

answer all these fields to be able to make a strong or definitive statement about their account or a group of accounts. The same could be said about the overall argument of Facebook. Look at the structure; Facebook is a strong unifying medium but where does the argument begin and end? This point seems like a rhetorical question; it is, but really it is also answerable. These profiles are not a unifying argument under traditional standards because the argument is unclear. Are the individual pages the actual argument, or is it the community as a whole that makes the argument? There is a concern that a university community is an argument, but Facebook does not have a thesis, and no transitions—it is hard to look for these things and make the same assessment about Facebook as an argument. It is inductive and deductive with no beginning or end. Facebook makes perfect sense to the audience, the argument's structure is impossible with rhetorical traditions.

Analyzing *style* is another problem with traditional rhetoric departments because every account has different concerns. There is a template-based structure, but content is different. For example, the style of an account created by a faculty member will be considerably different from an undergraduate student. Students primarily choose to use different rhetorical strategies than faculty from their syntax, semantics, and even the actual words they use. There is no conformity and there is no unified Facebook style with profiles. Each profile is different, but the style is so distinct and hard to condense that style becomes ineffective to explain the presentation. Where an author can look at the information and argue the information is rhetorically pleasing for the audience—the same would be used as opposition from the standpoint of traditional rhetoric. Style and presentation are important for the audience to accept and perceive clearly, but with Facebook there are too many different structures, grammars, and expectations that style is not unified enough for the departments of traditional rhetoric to apply.

Memory as the next department evaluates a person's ability to recall information within his/her argument for support as well as persuading the audience. Many accounts like Dr. Koster do not have lots of information, where some accounts choose to give too much information. However, Facebook does favor memory as a rhetorical standard. Look at the network; students are able to see a person they do not know connects with other people. Also, added features allow students to comprehend why they know a specific person. Little messages under a friend's list describe their friendship such as taking an ENGL 203 class or meeting at a fraternity or sorority party. Audiences are able to recall these memories easily because Facebook keeps track of the information inputted into an account holder's profile. Facebook is just as helpful with displaying someone's schedule. Sometimes a student may not know a fellow classmate's email to retrieve notes for a day someone was absent, but this same account holder could search under their classes and find out who is taking the class with him/her and simply email someone in the class for the notes. There are also consistent fields for individual profiles and Facebook allows students to keep record of friends as a form of holding information; while many of the other tools for rhetorical criticism have trouble explaining Facebook, memory shows how resourceful Facebook's network can be.

With *delivery*, here is where the issue of alphabetic text and hypertext cross paths. When the audience initially views a profile or account page, they will see the image. A good image is crucial to having a profile viewed, because all profiles are defined by the primary image inside the profile. Sometimes people choose to show a very modest and positive picture, some choose to have a political statement, and even some have had pictures of them wearing provocative and funny clothes. These images tap into the attractions of the general audience. This is a good alternative for traditional rhetoric, but at the same time, these images can be incriminating. Each

profile can have more pictures of specific events. If the delivery encompasses an image of a student engaging in illegal acts like drinking underage or smoking marijuana, students are presenting rhetorically negative images that will ultimately threaten their future. The delivery is effective and dangerous. Traditional rhetoric however does not deal with the concerns of electronic rhetoric. Graphics do not surround the world of written and spoken rhetoric—words and persuasive discourse. There are no titles on a Facebook profile, so only a student's name defines the title of the profile, but information explains the context better than a picture. Such context dictates how the audience will perceive the author of the profile.

With digital content becoming the newest wave in communication, it is important that students as well as academics consider the changes that audiences have created with rhetoric. Traditional rhetoric is not able to explain effectively why electronic media or online communities like Facebook attract various audiences. While the Age of Book has not reached its zenith, the Age of Technology has passed its infancy. Rhetoricians must also look to the future and work with the changing developments of technology. Rhetoricians must consider the issues of multimodality and the various interfaces that bombard audiences when assimilating information on digital media or the Internet in developing tools for analysis. Facebook is an excellent example to show the inadequacies of the traditional departments of rhetoric with current rhetorical strategies to analyze these new kinds of text. Audiences love having the ability to create something that is completely their own, but the authorship, the authority, the rhetorical strategy for a place such as Facebook is different. Even though clear and concise make up a large part of effective digital rhetoric, the incorporation of interactivity clearly demonstrates that audience needs are not met with the linear fashion of a codex, mere words on a printed page.

In order for students to be more competitive in the world, and for these same students to use rhetoric to their advantage, traditional rhetoric theory must be reassessed because students have to be able to connect the relationships between classical and modern rhetoric and to do so they must have a revised rhetorical theory, i.e. rhetorical theory version 2.0. Remember, not too long in the distant future, there will be that random someone who walks up and asks simply, “Are you on Facebook?” But the more important question should be a stronger rhetorical question, “Why Facebook?”

Works Cited

- “Facebook | Customer Support” *Facebook*. 2006. March 23, 2006
 <<http://winthrop.facebook.com/help.php#cat15>>.
- Blakelock, Jane Parenti, Jena Maddox Burges, Gail E. Hawisher, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Janice R. Walker. “The Future of Literacy.” *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy From the United States*. Ed. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004. 183-210.
- Chorney, Tatjana. “Interactive Reading, Early Modern Texts and Hypertext: A Lesson from the Past.” *Academic Commons*. 1.2 (2005). 27 February 2006
 <<http://www.academiccommons.org/commons/essay/early-modern-texts-and-hypertext>>.
- Daley, Elizabeth. “Expanding the Concept of Literacy.” *Educause Review*. 38.2 (2003): 33-40.
- Johnson-Eilola, Johndan. *Datacloud: Toward a New Theory of Online Work*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2005.
- Joyce, Michael. “Interspace: Our Commonly Valued Unknowing.” *Academic Commons*. 1.1 (2005). 12 January 2006
 <<http://www.academiccommons.org/commons/essay/interspace>>.
- Kress, Gunther. “Multimodality, Multimedia, and Genre.” *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Carolyn Handa. New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2004. 39-54.
- Lanham, Richard A. “Operating Systems, Attention Structures, and the Edge of

Chaos.” *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 227-257.

Lemke, J. L. “Metamedia Literacy: Transforming Meanings and Media.” *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Carolyn Handa. New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2004. 71-93.

Manovich, Lev. “Myth of Interactivity.” *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.

Preece, Jenny, and Diane Maloney-Krichmar. “Online Communities: Design, Theory, and Practice.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10.4 (2005). 27 February 2006 <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue4/preece.html>>.

Selfe, Cynthia L. “Toward New Media Texts: Taking Up the Challenges of Visual Literacy.” *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004. 67-112.

Warnick, Barbara. “Rhetorical Criticism of Public Discourse on the Internet: Theoretical Implications.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 28.4 (1998): 73-84.

Zappen, James P., Laura J. Gurak, Stephen Doheny-Farina. “Rhetoric, community, and cyberspace.” *Rhetoric Review*. 15.2 (1997): 400-419. *JSTOR*. Dacus Library, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC 13 February 2006 <<http://www.jstor.com/>>.