

**Book Review: *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric***

**Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson (Eds.). New York: Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-138-70239-4. Chapters: 17; Pages: 247. Price: \$49.95.**

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The ubiquity of digital media and its concomitant effect on communication and daily life creates a new and largely uncharted territory for rhetoricians to navigate. Rhetorical theory as it is applied to the digital—and the digital as applied to rhetorical theory—has thus far been scattered in fits and starts in rhetorical scholarship; scholars have yet to definitively establish exactly how we can translate rhetoric and its theories to the contemporary milieu. The challenge to rhetorical scholarship is to modify traditional theories of rhetoric to fit rapidly changing technology; as digital texts offer new and multivariied ways that audiences may experience texts, it becomes the crucial task of scholars of rhetoric to reimagine the ways in which to apply rhetoric to the digital and the ways in which the digital restructures the relationships between rhetor, audience, and text. *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*, edited by Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson, assumes this task. This edited collection is the result of a roundtable discussion that took place during the 2015 National Communication Association Conference in which participants discussed how rhetorical theory might be re-imagined in context of the internet. During the discussion, the editors discovered that rethinking rhetorical scholarship in this way also helped the participants to make sense of their own daily lives. For this reason, the editors follow Kenneth Burke in viewing good theory as equipment for living, and as such, curated this collection by inviting rhetorical scholars to ponder “how the intersection of being a rhetorician and being digital has shaped the way we navigate increasingly mediated lives” (p. xiv). The chapters in this edited collection weave personal narrative with theoretical musing as a way to explore theories of everyday contemporary life—a life that is marked by ubiquitous digital technology.

I originally approached this volume in hopes of finding a definitive way to attend to the rhetoric of digital texts. That, I quickly discovered, does not yet exist. What this book *does* achieve, however, is a clear documentation of the conversation as scholars grapple with the

challenges of translating rhetorical theory to digital contexts. The authors discuss the rhetorical frames that we may use to understand digital rhetoric, they explore the ways that digital contexts contribute to and extend rhetorical theory, and they extend possible theories and methods to use in rhetorical scholarship. Some chapters seem to contradict each other, while some expand upon others—but that is the point. Digital rhetoric today mirrors its object of analysis: the leviathan of our networked, digitized lives and the multivaried texts that we encounter within it.

In the volume's introduction, Hess addresses the necessity of rhetorical attention to the digital, arguing that prior rhetorical scholarship has already integrated into its theoretical arsenal media studies and technology, so digitality is a worthy extension for rhetoric. Hess defines digital rhetoric as “the study of meaning-making, persuasion, or identification as expressed through language, bodies, machines, and texts that are created, circulated, or experienced through or regarding digital technologies” (p. 6)—a predictable definition which he situates within a review of existing literature involving the intersection of rhetoric and technology and also through a cursory review of major rhetorical theory. Asserting the significance of digitality to rhetoric, Hess seems to position digital rhetoric at the forefront of the field. He writes, “Given the ubiquity of these technologies in the creation and circulation of rhetoric, every exchange is affected by them or their absence” (p. 7). Particularly useful in this introduction is the demarcation of four key themes for digital rhetoric: that digital rhetoric is computational and algorithmic, ordered yet playful, participatory and reaching, and embodied. These themes are not groundbreaking by any means, but the chapters in this volume adhere to them, providing continuity and accessibility to a subject that has yet to be specifically and coherently theorized.

The chapters in Part I posit rhetorical frames that may be used to better understand and interrogate digital rhetoric. In the first two chapters, Gunkel and Pfister explore the ways in which both scholarship and public discourse frame digital technology. Gunkel takes on a poststructuralist view of the binary logic of digital technology, arguing that previous research tends to devolve issues in digital technology into dichotomies—especially research attending to interface and user experience. Gunkel provides a useful description of structuralism and poststructuralism in terms of digital logic and argues that by taking on a poststructuralist view—tackling “different modes of thinking difference differently” (p. 23)—scholars may overcome the constraints of digital dichotomies in order to expand the rhetorical possibilities of digital technology.

Further recognizing the rhetorical need to break free from discursive constraints, Pfister uses a product pitch from a consumer electronics trade show as a frame through which to explore discourse about technology. Naming this discourse “technoliberalism” (p. 35), Pfister describes technological discourse as based in neoliberal thought, which promotes individualism and efficiency while emphasizing how systems are contrived through manipulating technology. Pfister asserts that the goal for contemporary rhetorical criticism should be to identify terms like those that arise from technoliberalism, to map how they emerge and assume meaning, and to show how they create a persuasive force in society. It then becomes the task of the critic to develop alternative terms to disturb the pervasiveness of the terms of technoliberalism. Both Gunkel and Pfister offer routes out of the constraints of the ways in which scholars and the public discuss technology, recognizing that discourse affects the trajectory of innovation.

The next three chapters of Part I (Brower, Zappen, and Wise) explore the ways that rhetorical scholars might ontologically approach user experience. Brower merges concepts of rhetoric, affect, and the digital to explore the experience of digital media using the example of the author's encounter of a presidential debate through a social media network feed. This chapter provides a useful review of affect studies to apply to the digital experience and it extends a discussion of medium that challenges McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" (p. 49). Brower follows Kraus (2006) in asserting that digitality produces a condition that is "post-medium" (p. 49), which is an important shift for rhetorical analysis because by viewing digital rhetorical phenomena as separate from a particular medium and its framing functions, mediation shifts from the medium itself to the perceiver. If we view medium in this way, we are better able to assess affective experience.

Moving from affect to engagement, Zappen interrogates the "Internet of Things," arguing that rhetoric must evolve to include a theoretical foundation for actively engaging with the digitized physical world in order to acquire the skills that are required to navigate it. In order to craft this theoretical foundation, Zappen first turns to Heidegger's response to 20<sup>th</sup> century physics, which protests against relativity theory in order to conceptualize how humans engage with physical things and discourse. Heidegger views this relationship as an active engagement, and Zappen extends this way of thinking to rhetoric through Barad's (2007) concept of inter-action, that the discursive and the material are enmeshed. Through this lens we can extend rhetoric to the physical world. Zappen uses Burke to reinforce this notion, arguing that by moving beyond rhetoric as a symbolic activity, Burke offers the possibility of viewing rhetoric as the interplay among multiple perspectives. Overall, Zappen provides a route through which we may engage rhetorically with an increasingly digitized world and take on issues that may arise from an Internet of Things.

One way we might rhetorically engage with an increasingly digitized world is by examining the ways in which technology creates rhetorical visions. Wise suggests that a rhetorical vision for digital life is the Clickable World—a world in which users gain power and agency from digital devices. By analyzing the rise and fall of Google Glass, Wise maps the aspects inherent in the Clickable World using the concept of assemblage to connect the vision of the Clickable World to the material world. Wise provides a brief but accessible explanation of Deleuze and Guatarri's concept of assemblage to anchor the analysis of Google Glass. Additionally, Wise offers two alternate examples of assemblages in the digital world: national surveillance and the Quantified Self. Wise recognizes the inherent control within these assemblages, and the assemblage of the Clickable World, and posits a minor mediature, fashioned after Deleuze and Guatarri's minor literature, characterized by a tactic of modulation to deterritorialize and deindividualize technology. This use of rhetorical theory illuminates the ways in which we may escape the controlling grasp of ubiquitous technology and reframe discourse as an emancipatory practice.

The chapters in Part II consider how digital contexts may contribute to and extend rhetorical theory. Davisson and Leone effectively use personal narratives to introduce how the affordances of technology creates digital spaces that may control, conceal, and limit in ways that appear to be natural but are in fact specifically designed to enact control. The authors argue that technological affordances are part of the rhetorical ecology of digital technology and are a critical example of how power dynamics can be used in a rhetoric of persuasion because they can be deployed by designers and then co-opted by users. In order to fully account for affordances, the authors suggest drawing a parallel between online and offline spaces because technological affordances often spill over into the material world. This is an important step, because as recognized by Hess in the introduction, scholars tend to separate

the digital from the material when they should be viewed as co-constitutive, especially in terms of control and power dynamics.

While digital technology controls, as Hinck asserts, it also offers flexibility. Hinck argues that digital technology changes how we view communities, publics, and public culture by allowing more opportunities for forming communities. Offering “fluidity” as a key word for digital rhetoric, Hinck describes the fluid nature of community life in a digitally networked society. She defines fluidity using the work of Bauman, Giddens, and Beck, and offers strategies to approach rhetoric in the fluid digital world. What emerges here is the idea that we should look past traditional institutions and hierarchical structures to find public action that is worthy of rhetorical interrogation: public action now also takes place in online communities, fan-based citizen performances, and through messages that circulate in social media. Hinck maintains that in order to do this, rhetoricians need to expand methodology to approaches that use ethnographic or participatory methods to engage these new communities.

Reyman, along with Lanius and Hubbell examine agency and power in digital contexts. Reyman tackles the distributed nature of agency in digital technology, arguing that algorithms, when viewed as an interaction between human and machine, play a constitutive role in the digital ecology; in this role, human and machine are indistinct. The precondition for this view is subverting binary thinking, and Reyman seems to follow Gunkel in this endeavor. Reyman asserts that we must rethink the concept of rhetorical agency to account for both human and technological agents, and posits the concepts of distributed rhetoric and rhetorical ecologies as essential concepts for extending agency to technological components. This extension is important in the digital age, as humans create and program technological, digitized “things” (software, algorithms, devices), but ultimately those “things” may function

on their own. The agency of the technological “thing” becomes apparent in conversations about glitches, which tend to blame either the machine or the human behind the machine. It is Reyman’s argument that we must take into account both agents in order to situate agency in the digital age. The idea of the interaction of human and machine as agents seems fitting, but it seems as though assigning agency to “things” may further confuse the assigning of responsibility when things go wrong.

Lanius and Hubbell problematize Reyman’s view of agency in the digital world as the interaction between human and machine. Lanius and Hubbell assert the rhetorical power of data, extending it beyond its traditional role as the starting point for rhetoric. Using classical concepts of rhetorical theory, the authors demonstrate how data itself can be rhetorical; however, they affirm that data originates from an author that collects and curates it “with clear intentions to compel action from users” (p. 128). In this sense, the data itself can be rhetorical, but only when manipulated by an author. Although not the focus for this chapter, Lanius and Hubbell’s view suggests that technological agency is held by the human behind the machine, which directly contradicts the preceding chapter. This inter-chapter debate is a key feature of the book and a beneficial introduction to the arguments and issues within the study of digital rhetoric.

Lunceford and Pham take on embodiment and identity through digital technology in the chapters following. Lunceford explores how we must consider the convergence of material and digital bodies, arguing that embodied experience, whether material or digital, affects available means of persuasion. Contrary to the view that the internet would create a utopian public sphere whereby it would offer an anonymous space that would dissolve difference, Lunceford suggests that this view assumes sameness, fails to take into account hegemonic

struggle, and deconstructs embodied experience. Lunceford argues that rhetorical accounts of the digital body cannot separate it from the material body; for example, accounts must consider structural aspects that affect the rhetoric that is available, such as accessibility, political constraints, and social constraint. This is an important assertion for the study of digital rhetoric: rhetoricians should not assume that digitality begets equality; material constraints carry over to the digital world.

Pham examines these material constraints in the expression of identity politics in digital contexts. By combining Spivak's "strategic essentialism" with Ono and Sloop's conceptualization of vernacular discourse, Pham seeks to reveal the potential of the internet and its communities to enact social change, build coalitions, and engage with diverse yet united identities. Pham is interested in how traditional identity politics merges with new technology, positing that digital spaces have manifested a resurgence of identity politics. In linking strategic essentialism to identity politics in the digital age, Pham demonstrates the ways in which technology and the vernacular guide community action and develop discourses of identity, providing a useful perspective of the blending of the material and the digital.

Part III offers theoretical and methodological paths for the study of digital rhetoric. Gibbons and Seitz assuage the methodological fears of students and scholars of rhetoric in a digital world by arguing that although the aggregation of digital media lends itself to social scientific methodology, rhetoricians do not need to use social scientific methods; we can engage digital rhetoric as a conversation in progress and establish new research practices to fit with digital technology. The authors model this assertion, writing the chapter as an exercise in extending methodology through the use of ideographic criticism on Twitter. Usefully, Gibbons and Seitz offer a primitive method to complete an ideographic criticism of digital

media: they combine en-mass filtering tools and textual analysis to put forth a clear analysis of “equality” as an ideograph. Through this exploratory experiment, Gibbons and Seitz provide a foundation from which others might replicate or re-imagine rhetorical criticism in the digital age.

Reinwald demonstrates another way in which to extend rhetorical method to digital media by using McLuhan’s tetrad and Pfister’s methods of attention to analyze the life and the use of specific hashtags on social media. Using the example of the #ALSicebucketchallenge hashtag, Reinwald explores how scholars of rhetoric might engage with digitality—and specifically the use of hashtags—to determine how these digital forms affect attention to political and social issues. Reinwald puts forth a clear extension of rhetorical method to the digital environment that could be useful to students and scholars alike.

Johnson complements an earlier chapter by Reyman that explores the distributed rhetorical agency of the digital age. Both chapters use algorithms as an example of this distributed agency, but while Reyman’s focus is a postmodern deconstruction of the binary thinking that separates human and machine, Johnson proposes a theoretical foundation to support the assertion of the agency of the machine. First, in a discussion that aptly situates the argument of the agency of algorithms, Johnson proposes a structural model based in articulation theory to examine the distributed nature of agency in the digital age, arguing that the interactive nature of technology connects the agency of algorithms to the responsibility of humans. Next, using Latour’s actor-network theory, Johnson explains algorithms and humans as co-constitutive actants. The problem with this is that algorithms cannot act entirely on their own; as such, it is necessary to explore how structures of power, created by humans, constrain algorithms. Johnson discusses this issue, asserting that rhetoricians may remedy this by

assigning different weights and values to actants within the network; as such, Johnson concludes that examining algorithms through the lens of rhetorical ecology further explains the contemporary interaction of human and machine, effectively re-imagining rhetorical agency in the current milieu.

Similarly, Jones re-frames rhetorical identification for the digital age and demonstrates how rhetorical theory contributes to the study of social media by examining the changes to identification. Using Bogost's procedural rhetoric and Burke's form, Jones argues that procedural rhetorics and shared conventional forms, rather than substance and content, produce identification on social media. Jones provides a useful overview of Burkean identification before presenting case studies of three social media platforms that highlight the use of procedural rhetoric and Burkean form to forge identification. Rather than constituting a shared essential identity, these platforms depend on the repetition of shared forms and procedures.

Chess then demonstrates how constitutive rhetoric can be used to analyze gaming and gamer communities. This chapter includes a practical review of constitutive rhetoric before extending the theory to digital contexts; this is aptly framed by the personal narrative of the author who is grappling with her identity as a female gamer. Chess utilizes Latour and Manovich to relate the distributed power of technology to constitutive rhetoric, a jump which is made easily especially after reading previous chapters exploring similar aspects of agency in digital technology. Chess demonstrates how the gaming industry, game development, and the gamer experience work together to embed identity into the games themselves, thus constituting new community identities. Essential to this is the affirmation of the control of the gaming industry, which may hold more power than Chess assigns to it even as she admits that

these constituted identities are still “marginalized and marginalizing” (p. 232). Nonetheless, Chess offers a useful way to think about the interaction of industry, technology, and the user.

In the Afterward, Ott warns scholars and students of rhetoric that we must not forget that the digital environment is still in its infancy. Ott posits the defining feature of the digital environment is its proliferation, which is a consequence of the production, format, and flow of information as a departure from analog media. Further, Ott asserts that media ecology is imperative to rhetorical study especially because of this departure from the analog; digital content is “seemingly invisible and immaterial” (p. 239). The task of rhetorical scholarship in this situation is to take risks to engage and disrupt the field as it evolves to account for the myriad changes that digital technology manifests; this is a task that this volume effectively tackles and fulfills.

*Theorizing Digital Rhetoric* offers students and scholars a way in to rhetorical study of the digital age through demonstrating how we may expand, contort, and repurpose rhetoric, its theories, and its methods to accommodate a changing media landscape. The chapters in the volume revisit and expand upon themes present in earlier titles, such as Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* (2006) and the more recent *Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age* (2015) edited by Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam Tyma. Additionally, the chapters in *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric* provide useful reviews of key rhetorical theories, concepts, and methods that are extended to digital technology while using personal narratives to foreground and frame arguments, forging an accessible inroad to sometimes dense or complicated topics. As a result, this volume is particularly accessible for graduate students and upper level undergraduate students in the fields of communication, media studies, and rhetoric, and especially useful for students who are interested in the study

of digital media; further, it offers entry into the ongoing conversation of the translation of rhetoric to contemporary society.

It is important to note that although each chapter could stand alone on its own as contributions to the field, the significance of the volume is really in the chapters' aggregation as nodes in the conversation. In other words, the value of this book is in the nuanced interaction of its chapters, which provide a variety of perspectives of the rhetorical approaches to digital texts. As such, this might be noted in the introduction in order to encourage reading the volume as an aggregate text rather than, as many students tend to do, as isolated chapters. If the editors would like to avoid this altogether, more attention may be given to the connections between chapters in order to highlight the conversations that they employ, especially as Hess offers the chapters as a "thorough sketch of the idea and application of digital rhetoric" (p. 12).

Aside from the addition of a more cohesive frame for the volume (which, as noted above, could in fact be purposeful as reflective of the discordant nature of the field at the present), *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric* is a timely and useful book that rises to the challenge of extending rhetorical theory to the digital context. The contributors collectively succeed in extending the salience of rhetoric to digital technology, and each makes useful contributions to the ways that we may approach rhetoric in the digital age. Technology is constantly evolving and changing as it gains an increasingly ubiquitous presence in daily life, as such, scholarship that seeks to make sense of an emergent context is essential in order to aptly shift the field of rhetoric towards the future. *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric* takes on this significant endeavor as each contributor provides a possible path that rhetoricians may pursue in the digital age.

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