Book Review: Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and

Pedagogies

Douglas Walls and Stephanie Vie (Eds.). Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse, 2018. ISBN 978-1-60732-861-2. Chapters: 16; Pages: 350. Price: $38.95.

Hannah Thornby
College of DuPage
thornbym@cod.edu

In *Social Writing/Social Media*, editors Stephanie Vie and Douglas Walls ask writing and literacy-focused teachers to consider the many elements of social media worthy of scholarly attention, from the seemingly pedestrian cases of personal communication to the powerful ways publics are now shaped. Invoking everything from the "public turn" in rhetorical scholarship to the 2016 election, they argue that social media has fundamentally changed how we should approach writing and literacy practices and that it is time that writing scholars and teachers have more substantiated approaches.

The collection builds on Vie and Walls' 2015 special issue in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*. *Social Writing/Social Media* showcases many of the same strengths as that collection, particularly when it comes to understanding participation online and including personal, social, political, methodological, and theoretical perspectives. This collection expands those discussions of participation online in section one's "Publics and Audiences," performance and identity in section two's "Presentation of Self, Groups, and Data," and social media literacy's classroom applications in section three's "Pedagogy."

Caroline Dadas' "Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk of 'Attention'" opens the section on public-facing social media action and public audiences by first calling into question criticisms of social media slacktivism. Dadas then argues that "hashtag activism" and mere awareness-focused social media movements are worthy of our scholarly and educational attention, particularly when it comes to accounting for circulation. In chapter two's "Sustaining Critical Literacies in the Digital Information Age: The Rhetoric of Sharing, Prosumerism, and Digital Algorithmic Surveillance," Estee Beck extends Dadas' most urgent message regarding social media—that social media literacy is not just technological, but political, social, and cultural. She does so by illustrating how "free" social media platforms employ surveillance and

are bound up in capitalism. Instructors will come away from chapters one and two with powerful

examples—from algorithm-affected Ferguson to the distortion of #yesallwomen—and

vocabulary (unpaid labor, prosumerism, rhetorical velocity, etc.) with which to talk with students

about what it means to be an effective writer and reader of social media.

Chapter three: "Social Spill: A Case-Based Analysis of Social Media Research" similarly

dials into the dynamics of social media activism in telling the story of West Virginians using

Facebook to protest the Tide company, but shifts directions; Tabetha Adkins' walk-through of

her own social media research decisions is best suited for those looking to design their own

social media research studies. Adkins explains how to go about making ethically and

methodologically sound decisions about what is and what is not "public," informed consent, and

the coding of data collected as remotely as social media data often is. Though the connection is

not explicit, Cory Bullinger and Vie's chapter works well to underline the significance of the

first three chapters' focus on social media's shaping power of contemporary discourse. Bullinger

and Vie's study of how social media ex-users and abstainers are framed in general discourse

reveals that non-users are commonly regarded as outsiders who are closed off from important

public discourse.

Chapters five and six speak the most directly to the first two title words of this

collection—social writing—and exemplify how groups' differing functions and differing ethos

are employed in non-academic, but very complex real-world rhetorical challenges. In

"Networking Hardship: Social Composing as Inventive Rhetorical Action," Crystal Broch

Colombini and Lindsey Hall introduce a platform called LoanSafe for users at risk of foreclosure

in order to draw out how groups might pool resources and knowledge in one space, but write for

individual reasons in other spaces. The authors' synopsis of LoanSafe users' unconventional

methods to gain access to expert knowledge attests to social media's power to enable users to

circumvent traditional gatekeepers and barriers. Liza Potts' "Still Flying: Writing as

Participatory Activism Circulating Across the Firefly 'Verse" speaks to the more precarious

matter of power in the untraditional arenas that are digital spaces. Her story of *Firefly* fans' battle

against 20th Century Fox also offers avenues of discussion regarding how digital communities

form and enact ethos using shared language across platforms, how digital spaces complicate

issues of ownership and copyright, and how digital genres can be subverted.

While section one largely highlights the power of collective action on social media, most

of the chapters in the second section attend to a much more personal dimension of social media.

Drawing largely upon personal communication, Bronywn T. Williams, Douglas M. Walls, and

Amber Buck's respective chapters detail why and how social media researchers and literacy

scholars might meaningfully take into account time, bodies, identity, relationships, nonlinguistic

behaviors, affect, and users' use of multiple platforms at once. In "Having a Feel for What

Works: Polymedia, Emotion, and Literacy Practices with Mobile Technologies," Williams

argues for different approaches to students' rhetorical development in the writing classroom

given how attuned to emotionality students are in their everyday digital literacy practices.

"Visualizing Boutique Data in Egocentric Networks" from editor Douglas M. Walls makes the

case for "medium-scale" social media research and serves as the collection's most focused look

at how to treat data. Walls adds more nuance to the conversation of embodied experiences on

social media by pointing out that maintaining one's network requires rhetorical *effort*—time,

energy, and resources. Buck's "Grad School 2.0: Performing Professionalism on Social Media,"

is distinct in how she complicates the traditional professional enculturation narrative. In studying

the literacy practices of professionalizing academics on social media, Buck also brings to light

how writing becomes more challenging as professional and personal identities increasingly blur

as scholars navigate different platforms and networks.

The scholars' approaches and arguments in the next three chapters of section two are

perhaps the most novel and important sections of the collection. Like Buck, Les Hutchinson's

"Writing to Have No Face: The Orientation of Anonymity in Twitter" further takes up identity

conflicts in online spaces but does so by addressing one of the most unique and powerful

affordances of digital public discourse: anonymity. Her chapter on anonymity is particularly

interesting because of how Hutchinson draws from her own experience as a person occupying an

anonymous place on Twitter and engaging with the online protest group Anonymous. Those

looking to understand identity and safety online should look for Hutchinson's discussions about

how to evaluate and employ anonymity in online spaces. In "Indigenous Interfaces," Kristin L.

Arola offers a heuristic for thinking through the ways that the interfaces we use every day

(Facebook, for starters) operate from a "white as default" premise (p. 211). Though Arola stops

short of recommending any real overhaul of our current interfaces, she provides important ways

to question how platforms structure our experiences, and consider our relationality, identity, and

perhaps most importantly, a rhetor's ability to have a say in the shape of their discourse in online

spaces.

Kara Poe-Alexander and Leslie A. Hahner's "The Intimate Screen: Revisualizing

Understandings of Down Syndrome through Digital Activism on Instagram," provides the

clearest example of how digital activism's rhetorical architecture can look differently than that of

traditional movements. Hahner and Alexander use a visual rhetorical analysis of a down

syndrome activist's Instagram to introduce the "intimate screen" as a more subtle, but arguably

just as powerful form of activism that draws upon images and the embodied smartphone

experience. While conversations of circulation and audience are somewhat absent, this final

chapter in section two can equip activists with important new ways to think through how to

effect change in online spaces.

Almost all of the authors included in this collection write directly to teachers at some

point in their essays; the last four chapters in this collection are merely the most pointed

discussions. First, Patricia Portanova's "The Rhetoric of Distraction: Media Use and the Student

Writing Process" takes up student writing processes rather than literacies. The artificial writing

processes studied might give some pause, but process-focused instructors will likely be intrigued

by Portanova's claim that a students' ability to avoid harmful smartphone distractions is

connected to their ability to metacognitively think about their own process.

Returning once again to the matter of literacy, Chapter 14, 15, and 16 nicely bookend this

collection and most directly take up the call Vie first sounded in her 2008 *Computers and*

Composition article "Digital Divide 2.0: 'Generation M' and Online Social Networking Sites in

the Composition Classroom": teachers should look to first acknowledge students' prior

knowledge and practices with social media in order to meaningfully build academic literacy

development. Michael J. Faris does this in the most head-on way in "Contextualizing Students'

Media Ideologies and Practices: An Empirical Study of Social Media Use in a Writing Class" by

reporting on a class in which he asked students directly about what he refers to as their "media

ideologies" and "idioms of practice." Even more useful than these new terms for approaching

student literacy is Faris' example of what to actually *do* with student literacy knowledge and how

to adapt a class. Those looking for fresh ideas about how to incorporate students' social media

literacies in the classroom will also find Lilian W. Mina's update on the "digital divide" helpful.

In "Social Media in the FYC Class: The New Digital Divide," Mina collects, categorizes, and

theoretically situates social media-employing pedagogies, offering a range of approaches

teachers can build on and use in their own first-year writing classrooms.

Chris M. Anson's "Intellectual, Argumentative, and Informational Affordances of Public

Forums" most directly articulates the pedagogical opportunities that this edited collection seeks

to make plain: Students are writing more than they ever have before because of social media.

Moreover, Anson writes, their writing is for more overt and authentic purposes, which lead to

more opportunities for students to be able to understand, engage, and navigate the social and

rhetorical constructions of particular communities. Yet as long as scholars and compositionists

don't meaningfully involve the place where students are most powerfully developing these self-

sponsored rhetorical skills—social media platforms—the longer they will miss opportunities to

acknowledge and meaningfully build from students' literacies.

Some clear themes emerge from Vie and Walls' collection: understanding social media

requires an understanding of embodiment, emotionality, and the shifting and complicated matter

of identity; writing with others in online spaces presents new affordances and constraints;

students come ready with their own digital literacy practices but might need further instruction

on social media's political, social, and economic dimensions; any theory or social media research

must now look to how rhetors and discourse recursively move between platforms; the rhetorical

architecture of contemporary activism and discourse has and will continue to change. The

organization of chapters into "Publics and Audiences," "Presentation of Self, Groups, and Data,"

and "Pedagogy" do not necessarily reflect these themes and may not even be the most helpful

organization for those interested specifically in these categories. In fact, a more apt name for

section two might have addressed how that range of essays on activism and networks brings to

the fore how social media is an intimate affair; conversations about intimacy are certainly more

prevalent than "data." Moreover, important pedagogy-focused discussions are found throughout

almost every chapter (perhaps to be expected as this book is aimed at those studying and

teaching literacy skills) and lengthy conversations about public rhetorical action or identity are

hardly restricted to either section one ("Publics and Audiences") or section two ("Presentation of

Self").

Some will likely find the collection's considerable focus on the more intimate and

personal interactions and networks of social media as less urgent than other scholarship on online

spaces such as what to do about harassment, hate, and nonhuman actors online. Yet, if we are

going to focus on student literacy, this collection offers essential reminders of how students are

going to situate themselves as rhetors online and approach public discourse. Finally, while

literacy and where to start with students' rhetorical development in contemporary writing

classrooms dominate these essays, this collection is also rich with theoretical discussions and

important examples from which digital rhetoric, media studies, and communication scholars

might draw on to continue to conduct and advocate for social media scholarship.