

Digitizing Identity and Credibility: Authority and Authorship in New Media¹

Galen Broaddus

The times, they are a-changin'.
– Bob Dylan

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.
(*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*)
– Alphonse Karr

It might be said that technology changes everything (or at least has a tendency to do so), and that tendency is at least true in a number of areas: communication, through E-mail instant messaging, text messaging, and so forth; commerce, through online vendors and E-commerce; and the commonplace, even such mundane aspects of life as ordering takeout food. Writing is no exception, and technological advances from the pencil to the typewriter have changed the writing process in various ways (Baron 17-19). As Cynthia Selfe notes, “When English studies teachers get together to talk about technology, we generally end up talking about change” (292), and certainly the words of Bob Dylan – although intended to speak about a different climate of change – are true of technology’s influence in many respects. Even though the reactions to this change tend to range from extreme suspicion to “inflated” optimism (Baron 18-19), there is room for a critical analysis of how some of the most recent technological advances in digital media have impacted writing in some rather remarkable ways.

The concepts of authorship and authority – that is, the content and nature of an author’s identity and an audience’s confidence in the author, respectively – will here provide a useful guide for examining any changes that have occurred as a result of new digital technologies, most notably the advent of the Internet and web-based communication and writing tools. Although technology can be discussed in many ways, the scope of this paper will focus on “digital

rhetoric,” defined by Jim Ridolfo as “a communicative object or series of communicative objects that are created, maintained, or disseminated through or within binary environments” and which do not “directly face the physical boundaries of delivery that delimit analog rhetorics” (qtd. in Digirhet.org 243). Digital writing spaces such as weblogs (hereafter “blogs”) are a prime example of this type of object, and they also serve as some of the best examples of how digital rhetoric has changed the ways in which authorship and authority are considered.

However, a disclaimer is in order first: just as one should think in terms of *rhetorics* in plural rather than the singular *rhetoric* (Berlin 3), one should avoid thinking of one monolithic digital rhetoric but instead of multiple digital rhetorics. Moreover, in light of the second epigraph, one must also remember that many aspects of analog rhetorics will likely be evident in their digital counterparts. Angela Haas reminds us:

All writing is digital, *digitalis* in Latin – which means “of or relating to the fingers or toes” or “a coding of information.” Given this, we should be reminded of writing known to us though [sic] history that was executed with the use of fingers and codes [...] These writings should be studied further to better understand the evolution and complexity of digital rhetoric and to re-vision and revise our notion of digital rhetoric as a “new” mode of communication. (qtd. in Digirhet.org 242-243)

With this in mind, it is prudent to examine the ways in which digital rhetorics resemble analog rhetorics, especially the three major epistemological theories explicated by James Berlin: objective, subjective, and transactional (6). This examination will in turn serve as a fertile ground

for evaluating the dissimilarities in the new digital rhetoric in terms of authority and authorship and perhaps even in challenging these theories as strict boundaries in light of these changes.

Analog as Analogue¹

As suggested in the previous section, there is a degree to which the discussion of changing ideas of authority and authorship in digital rhetoric must first establish the ways in which these ideas are considered in analog rhetorics (where analog simply indicates rhetoric related to texts that are not solely digital and generally subsist in some material form such as printed text). As Dennis Baron suggests, technology starts out by imitating previous forms, only taking on new directions and functions after being propagated to a larger, more inclusive audience (16). This pattern of gradual change is evident as well in the formation and development of digital rhetorics.

To illustrate this, I have taken what I consider to be the paradigmatic forms or genres within the three main rhetorics in order to show the change that has occurred as these forms are remediated into digital texts. For objective rhetoric, I have selected the controversial but eminently important field of Web journalism, looking at how the Internet has not only made a wider variety of texts more available to a wider audience but also how this increased audience has driven new participants in journalistic affairs and thus raised some suspicion about the future state of journalistic standards. With its rich heritage of news publications as the gatekeepers from whom credibility is established, authority is a significant aspect of this new area, and the rise of a

¹ Some readers may be confused by the apparent lack of dissimilarity in these two terms, the former being an American spelling and the latter British. I use the phrase to indicate my thesis, which is that analog rhetorics, appropriately to their name, provide the basis for thinking about digital rhetorics through an analogical relationship. The differentiation in spelling is admittedly rhetorical – ‘analog as analog’ simply lacks the suggestive force of the differentiated phrase.

more democratic blogger-journalist base shows how the discourse is no longer simply among media outlets.

As an example of typically subjective rhetoric, the paradox of blogging as public self-writing serves as a demonstration of how digital media have blurred distinctions between the public and private spheres, making the personal accessible to a broad audience immediately. As is common among digital media, there are also worlds of connections to be made between such blogs, among bloggers as well as those who respond to their writing through commenting features. Here we see the ubiquitous undertones of transactional rhetoric (especially the social epistemic branch), which is evident as well in other media such as collaborative writing tools and social news sites, creating a discourse and confusing the distinction between monological writing and dialogical conversation.

Objective Rhetoric: Web Journalism

If there is one writing genre that has changed drastically in at least one regard, it is perhaps journalism, and it is in larger part due to the prevalence of digital media and the rise of a consumer base that relies on this technology. Barb Palser makes the very provocative statement, “Newspapers should be planning for a print-free future,” citing statements in 2007 by Arthur Salzberger, Jr., CEO of the New York Times Co., in which he suggest that the *New York Times* might not be printed but instead published solely online (“Preparing for the End” 64). Salzberger’s comments might have perhaps been a bit hasty, but there is a challenge ahead for news media: “The challenge is not about the date the printing presses shut down; it’s about the day newspapers’ print customers and advertisers can no longer support the costs of journalism” (“Preparing for the End” 64).

Many such papers – such as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, to name but a few – have created a prominent online presence to compete in a market where print revenue is down and Internet readership is on the rise. As a result of this trend away from print toward digital news, there is a false rivalry (at least in Palser’s estimation) between the two. She notes that there also is a sense in which both forms of journalism have the same goal in mind: “However, many [defenders of print] are using newspapers as shorthand for the types of journalism the best papers represent [...]. When editors protest the terrible things happening to newspapers, they’re warning us that quality journalism is in jeopardy” (“A False Rivalry” 42). These individuals often see print journalism as the gatekeeper of serious journalism and online journalism as an interloper therein when in fact the latter is simply another way of disseminating news by the same standards as the print tradition.

Palser significantly underscores an anxiety: standards of journalistic output. In the sphere of print journalism, credibility is largely established by one’s organization and record. The *New York Times*, to use just one example, has a brand that gives the authority when they publish an article, review, or editorial. When these publications take their work to the Web, their credibility is transferred then to their online presence, and the news read there is as much a product of the organization as their daily newspaper. Despite some exaggerated predictions about where journalism is heading, there is still demand for the kind of credibility that comes from having the tradition and brand behind the work.

There is still another current source of journalism that requires discussion as well: the rise of blogger-journalists. The prevalence and immense readership that blogs have has made them quite significant in catalyzing these changes, and journalism (as shall be evident later as well) is

only one of the many areas of impact. The primary claim that is generally made when assessing the effect of blogs in this regard is that it will inevitably “democratize” journalism, taking power away from corporate media and placing it firmly in the hands of ordinary denizens, the blogger-journalists. As Jason Gallo notes, “There has been a great deal of buzz recently about the potential for Weblogs [...] to revolutionize journalism, to make it more democratic, and to help demystify the craft by exposing the wizard behind the curtain of the media establishment” (1).

In 2001, J.D. Lasica made his prediction on the future of blogging as journalism:

While no one is really sure where this is all heading, my hunch is that blogging represents Ground Zero of the personal Webcasting revolution. Weblogging will drive a powerful new form of amateur journalism as millions of Net users – young people especially – take on the role of columnist, reporter, analyst and publisher while fashioning their own personal broadcasting networks. It won’t happen overnight, and we’re now seeing only version 1.0, but just wait a few years when broadband and multimedia arrive in a big way. (1)

The proliferation of both broadband Internet access and multimedia such as streaming video (e.g. YouTube) and podcasting are both evident; what then remains of Lasica’s prediction?

Gallo, writing a few years after Lasica, disagrees with such optimistic assessments, saying that they “are only partially correct and are derived more from speculation based on the potential of the medium rather than from actual results” (1). The change, he contends, that blogs have had on journalism is “more a prolonged infiltration than a sudden overthrow [...] Weblogs have not, and will not, eliminate or replace established media outlets; rather, they will be integrated into their ever-evolving palate of complementary media available to journalists and to

the public” (1). After all, print has not gone the way of the dodo merely due to technology; there is still demand for magazines, pamphlets, and other source of information in print.

Blogs, therefore, are a way of augmenting the pre-existing journalistic output and making it more accessible to the public through digital technologies. Gallo states it as such: “It is reasonable to predict that Weblogs will follow the pattern of prior communication technologies and initially disrupt entrenched journalistic practices yet, over time, become integrated components of the mainstream media landscape” (1). Even so, Gallo recommends suspending judgment on the situation; only the future will tell whether or not blogs will prove as significant a force as some suppose them to be.

Regardless of the outcome, however, it is clear that the current state of blogs as journalism is to take some of the authority out of the hands of established media by providing the augmentation of news. Online readers consume the content of blogs as a way of getting news, and – even though this trend is probably falling – many bloggers do not have relevant qualifications to establish them as journalists, instead gathering their base by producing material that these consumers seek out and respond to. As Carroll notes, “Blogs are perceived by some segments of traditional journalism as a threat in part because the format lacks many of the qualities that have traditionally defined journalism” (1). The fact that established media are now starting to embrace blogs as a way of disseminating news in a slightly different format – but still within the constraints of the organization – is a sure sign that authority is an important aspect of why blogs are significant in this new age of journalism and why it is likely that they will continue to co-opt the form even as it democratizes the process somewhat.

Subjective Rhetoric: Weblog as Self-Writing

One of the benefits of digital media is the ability for a large number of people to have a publication method that is (with the advent of better technologies) generally easy to manage and requires no “gatekeeper” for distribution, as publishing companies have been in the past (and still are) in many ways. It is currently possible for anyone who can get access – even public access – to a computer and an Internet connection to have their own blog. Most individuals who use blogs will not use them for journalism or activism; as Torill E. Mortensen notes, “The common practice of blogging is rarely dominated by clear, touching prose, deep academic thinking or political debate” (1). The ordinary blogger will simply use their blog as a personal writing space.

Two components of this practice have interesting implications for subjective rhetorics. First, the public and private spheres are blurred by this use: “The Internet brings that which never before was visible into the light of the day, mingling public information with private tidbits from which the public should perhaps be spared” (Mortensen 1). The final evaluation aside, Internet publishing does in fact put information out for practically anyone to read, and so the practice of writing for self takes on a new significance.

Second, blogs are not merely texts like an autobiography, diary, or journal, even where they share some common traits. There is a web of information that makes it such that a single blog will not stand alone as an ordinary subjective text would:

We recognize the weblog through the connection between text fragments, within one blog, but also to other texts available online. This means both existing connections and potential connections: those made by the writer and those made

by the reader, as the reader again becomes writer and links to the weblog from his or her own piece of work - frequently a weblog. (Mortensen 1)

These connections are part of why blogging as self-writing can be appealing.

Despite the subjective nature of these works, the general appeal for consumption is somewhat elusive and defies definition. Authorship is, as would be expected, personal, but blogs are unique in that personal writing can be appealing to a broad audience without requiring the author to be well-known. This sentiment has been expressed humorously in a webcomic which shows two main routes for becoming a famous blogger: become famous and then a

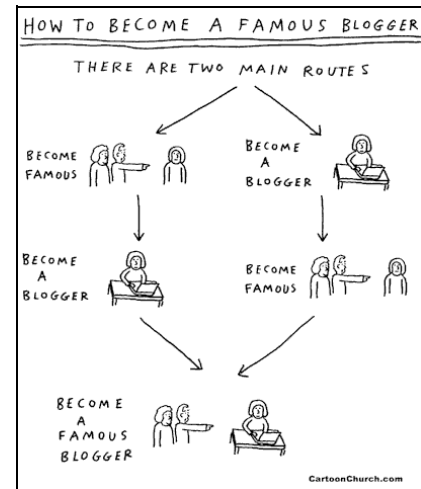


Figure 1

blogger, or become a blogger and then become famous (Walker; see Fig. 1, below). The very fact that the latter option is possible is telling to how credibility is more fluid than in other analog counterparts.

Mortensen gives two examples which illustrate this point well. The staff of President George W. Bush has in the past maintained a blog for him (as of 19 April 2008, the site redirects to the Republican National Committee website), signing the entries “posted by GeorgeWBush.com.” On the other hand, the writer of the site *she’s a flight risk* (formerly at <http://shes.aflightrisk.org>; currently inaccessible), “isabella,” writes without disclosing personal identity. It is perhaps somewhat the inexplicable fact that “isabella” is unknown and mysterious but still quite opinionated that gives her more life – more “reality,” one might say – that the staff of George W. Bush managed to put into his blog (1).

Blogs provide an outlet for subjective rhetoric that makes them conducive to other forms of discourse as well, especially in making connections to others. Unlike some other forms of self-writing, blogging-for-self requires less consideration of how identity and authority are composed in authorship, although the private-yet-public writing can have a profound effect and move others both to read these seemingly private entries and also to continue discourse in the larger sphere about them.

Transactional Rhetoric: A Truly Democratic Rhetoric?

As noted above in the discussion of journalistic blogging, the Internet is often thought of as an equalizing tool to put power back into the hands of the people regarding the messages that are disseminated about the public. Since the Internet is at its core a massive network of computers (and now of users), it makes perfect sense to speak of the communication that happens among the networks that exist on the Internet. From this, one can see a few phenomena arise: the Web as a place for democratic discourse and as a space for democratic composition.

In her article “Parody Blogging and the Call of the Real,” Trish Roberts-Miller gives a personal example of her dissatisfaction with public debate and coverage of the war in Iraq. She wanted argumentation – what she defines, with some assistance from James Kinneavy, as “discourse in which the rhetor intends to argue” (1) – in something more than simple assertion and agreement. In short, she wanted interaction, and her assessment of blogs was disheartening:

I had thought that the proliferation of blogs would have the effects many people have claimed for them--a more open and public public sphere of participatory argumentation rather than simply expression. I was instead dismayed to see a realm, not of counterpublics, but of enclaves, and of a system that, at its worst,

facilitated the hardening of ideology, and, at its best, allowed for an expressive public sphere. (1)

In response, she started writing a parody blog in which she wrote as her dog, Chester, on political issues as well as some “personal” matters from the dog’s perspective. The idea was to mock the sort of affirmation that was occurring in these circles rather than argumentation, and she found a therapeutic way of getting out her frustration about what was *not* happening on blogs through this medium.

On the other hand, there is somewhat of a sphere that develops – the “blogosphere,” as it has been termed – which does allow for some interaction between bloggers and within blogs by way of comment features and “blogrolls,” collections of links to other blogs generally listed on the sidebar of one’s blog (Baoill 1). What develops here is one of the facets that Roberts-Miller scoffed at: the tendency of individuals to group with like-minded individuals who share common interests (Blanchard 1). As Anita Blanchard explains, there are quite a few potential benefits to having virtual communities, including “increas[ing] involvement within people’s face-to-face communities” (1). A social network develops in these ways among communities.

Blanchard is not entirely optimistic about whether or not virtual communities are attainable through blogs – for instance, the inability of some blogs to allow comments makes community almost impossible – but certainly the idea of virtual communities or settlements growing around blogs holds many implications for writing. The most profound is that the author need not be a specialist or particularly qualified; they just need to be an interested party with writing skills and the ability to generate discussion that all of the members of the community can

participate in. In the Julie/Julia project, many individuals expressed that they read the work because the writing was engaging and the members felt a connection to the author's experiences.

Steven Krause disagrees, stating that "blogs are in their most basic sense electronic journals; more often in not, they are spaces for publishing highly individualistic writing" (1). Favoring instead E-mail lists for discussion, Krause suggests that blogs "do not foster this sort of dynamic discussion" and that "the dialog is not the *literal* sort that is fostered and promoted by email exchanges" (1). There may be some truth to these statements, but blogs certainly seem to have the capacity for direct, literal dialogue, especially with readers' ability to subscribe to blogs via RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, which help centralize one's preferred outlets and can even make them aware of conversations already occurring.

Lastly, the possibilities for collaborating via digital media are expansive. With the advent of communicative technology, monological ways of communication are being abandoned for dialogic models. We must concur with Joe Moxley and Ryan Meehan when they point out, "As access to the World Wide Web increases, so does the 'conversation'" (4). This goes for information as well; Wikipedia is a well-known (and highly contentious) tool where users can contribute content to an encyclopedia that results in information on a large number of subjects, "rival[ing] its multi-volume, hard-cover counterparts" (Moxley and Meehan 5).

Additionally, social news sites such as Digg (digg.com) and Reddit (reddit.com) put the power in the hands of the people to determine what stories are important, and this is collaboration in a significant way in that the readers really do make the top news stories by going online and voting them to the top. The readers are an important part of the discourse about these stories. In a very intriguing way, the social news site Newsvine.com has an even more interesting

approach to the news: readers find news for the site that can be voted on, but they also have the ability to contribute content which can also be voted and read by Newsvine consumers (Moxley and Meehan 5). In a way, this brings collaboration into the realm of journalism, eschewing mainstream media outlets for a collage of various sources and personal contributions to the project.

Authors Without Borders

It is clear from the many examples of digital media that the rhetorics here are fluid and often overlap where boundaries are still visible. It is difficult to think just of objective rhetoric because it is now conversational and often dependent on the personality of the author, especially in the case of blogger-journalists; it is difficult to consider subjective rhetoric when an audience of consumers can see your private information; it is difficult to consider merely transactional rhetoric when it can be used in ways analogous to objective and subjective rhetorics in analog media. Lines are blurred, crossed, and something eliminated altogether.

One possible reason for this shift and subsequent redefinition (if indeed there is a clear definition of boundaries in these new rhetorics) is the fluid nature of the media. Without such a need for a material medium such as print for the text to persist, other limitations such as normal conventions can be disregarded in greater number, and it is very possible that we are starting to see some of the potential experimentation that will arise as these technologies become more widespread and – perhaps consequently – more credible forms of communication and expression. Analog media still hold a great deal of hegemony, especially among older textual consumers, but their grasp is loosening (for better or worse) as they lose some of their influence to digital media. Of course, it may be too hasty to predict the demise of printed texts – a

millennia-old tradition – but the possibilities of digital technology to enhance or alter the way that we look at rhetoric, communication, and discourse in general are vast and deserve fair attention for those capacities.

As has been suggested at various points above, the ability of the average person to publish information with much less difficulty than with previous technology is part of what makes authorship and authority such an important consideration for these new rhetorics. When the average person can publish, credibility will, without a doubt, become significant since there is no barrier (or at least less of one) to prevent someone from disseminating ideas that may or may not be based off accurate or well-researched information. Those who already fear that critical thinking is at an all-time low will find this ability disconcerting. Conversely, those who think that diversity of opinion is worthwhile or even necessary for a fully-functioning democratic society – especially among those classes that have been greatly disenfranchised in the past by hierarchies that limited their access to publication – will laud this new uprising.

The focus on the individual, paradoxically, also gives way to a discussion of the public nature of these technologies and how individuals are now connected to millions of other writers and publishers all around the world. Authors have an incredible audience with digital media, which can be as limited as smaller virtual communities but immensely larger at times. This situation of each writer within the grand whole makes authorship the perfect way of examining these changes, as it gives us insight into how authorship is more fluid, even making anonymity or pseudonymity a more viable option. The interaction of each person within a public sphere is profound and carries many further implications for this rhetoric that could be explored in more depth.

The technology is certainly new, and there is still much examination to be done of these media and methods of using them. It is only by examining their content and structure further that we can better understand why they have been so significant in the lives of textual consumers since their recent rise to prominence. There is a great deal of promise in what these technologies can do to help change – if *revolutionize* is too strong a descriptor – the way we conventionally use rhetoric for a variety of aims. It may have the power to democratize our communication and give power to the powerless; it might even change the way we think about publication and the wealth of information that is now readily available to us in almost any direction we look. By this sort of critical analysis, we will see how much more – or less – the digital author can impact an analog world.

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