Investigating the Digital Nonhumanities

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One of the unique challenges, and I would say great fascinations, with the study of media, particularly for a scholar such as myself who investigates the cultural and rhetorical effects of contemporary media, is the effort of keeping up with rapid technological development. In the last 10-15 years the expansion of social media, mobile technologies, and IoT devices, the increasing speed and availability of networks, the arrival of AR and VR, and the increasing influence of data science, algorithms, machine learning, and AI, to name a few of the most obvious examples, have transformed cultures and our lived experience not only in the industrialized world, where access to such things is easiest, but on a global scale. The geopolitical ramifications of using social media to subvert democratic elections and create ubiquitous surveillance states with social credit scores, the cognitive and psychological effects of our incessant dependence upon smartphones, and the ecological impacts and ignored externalities of technological "progress" have exploded the scope and intensified the exigency of media study. And that is to name only a handful of areas in which study is possible.

In this broad range of possibilities, my work has emerged at the intersection of digital rhetoric (my home field), media study, posthumanism, and new materialism. I explore

questions such as how deliberation occurs in the distributed cognition of digital media ecologies or how attention is managed at the intersection of a smartphone and its human user. Deliberation and attention are classical concerns of rhetoric. To put it in familiar Aristotelian terms, the available means of persuasion rely upon holding an audience's attention and guiding their deliberations to suit the rhetor's purpose. However, deliberation and attention also echo familiar mainstream concerns with critical thinking, fake news, distraction, internet addiction and so on. My interest, thus, is in the shifting rhetorical capacities within digital media. In posthuman and new materialist rhetoric, rhetorical agency emerges in the ecological and ambient relations among humans and nonhumans. In the digital context, it is self-evident that we could not make effective deliberations about the media available to us without the assistance of search engines and related algorithms. Similarly, we could not access or regulate the flow of information coming to us without the operations of our smartphones. At the same time, it is equally obvious that our relationships with these devices are not simple; they are not the mute and obedient servants of our independent will. In fact, we cannot fully know what is happening when we interact with these technologies as many of their operations are hidden and proprietary. As Latour would say, we are "made to act" by these relationships, not compelled to act (or at least not usually so) but rather constructed with certain capacities for action through our encounters with digital media (46). With this in mind, my research seeks to describe those relations and the capacities that emerge with the intention of creating new rhetorical capacities. In my most ambitious and optimistic moment, I hope that discovering such capacities might lead to better rhetorical means for addressing the many challenges digital media present to us.

That said, there are so many other questions to pursue.

There are also many other practices to pursue than the writing of academic articles or monographs that have largely characterized my research practice. I have published several born-digital articles that combine image, audio, and/or video with text, but disciplinary expectations have always grounded such work in writing, at least for me. The rise of the digital humanities, critical making, videographic criticism and other forms of digital scholarship suggests a different future. As I see it, the challenge has never been to figure out how to make these emergent genres replicate the work of print scholarship but rather to discover what new rhetorical practices they can develop. The academic essay, the monograph, and the conference presentation participated in the development of specializations, fields, disciplines, and departments across the arts and humanities in the twentieth century. Through our relations with those rhetorical ecologies we became populations of scholars. From there we built expectations of literacy for our students: how they should read and write. Each of us has been trained by those expectations.

With this in mind, as I see it, in addition to the broader rhetorical challenges we all face in digital media ecologies, as scholars we must encounter our own. Will the quiet discourse communities of journals, bookshelves, and concurrent panel sessions provide the means we require to meet these challenges? I doubt it, but what new communities, audiences, participants, and populations of scholars will arise in the context of emerging media? What will our students require from us as professionals, intellectuals, artists, and citizens? As humans? And perhaps most poignantly, how will we best serve those students? As a rhetorician (though I do not doubt other academics feel similarly), the centuries-long tradition of my work is intimately tied to the development of students as democratic citizens. So, I find myself ending much where I began. The task before us is tremendous and made no less so by

the ground shifting beneath our feet. In all that though, the expansive and varied investigation

of media is needed more than ever.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford

    UP, 2005.