Speaking of Composing (Frameworks): New Media Discussions, 2000–2010

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Abstract

This article examines scholarly conversations for discussions of new media in *College Composition and Communication*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Computers and Composition*, and *Kairos* from 2000–2010. The author argues new media is a part of a larger, complex scholarly conversation that seeks to position rhetoric and composition within contemporary society while contributing to an understanding of the frameworks used to discuss composing, making the field relevant. The author analyzes published documents in the ten-year time period through a combination grounded theory, open coding approach. Using interrater reliability, the author's empirical analysis of the field's published scholarly conversations supports the argument that new media functions as one opportunity for the field to maintain relevance among a broad community of non-academic writers.
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Keywords: New media; History; Disciplinary development; Published scholarship; Composition

> "Examining the history of composition-rhetoric allows us to see our discipline, which seems sometimes to be spinning centrifugally to pieces, as what it truly is: the current avatar of a tradition of studying and using discourse that is as old as literacy and probably older."
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> –Robert Connors, Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, theory, and pedagogy

Rhetoric and composition has long drawn on rich discussions of writing technologies to move the field forward. *Computers and Composition* (*C&C*) has been demonstrating this fact since its first published edition (a newsletter edition) in 1983, and even earlier, in 1979, Ellen Nold published her "Fear and trembling: A humanist approaches the computer," which *Computers & Composition* (2013) suggested was "arguably the first article in the field" (para. 4). Further, the field at large recognizes the importance of paying attention to writing technologies: In 1982, the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Computers and Composition (7Cs) was officially chartered, and it has continued to play an important role in the field as writing technologies become more frequently digital and computer-based. Over the past decade, from 2000–2010, the conversation about writing technologies continued its robust growth. Discussions of new media had already entered the field's discourse, but the prevalence of such a fraught term in the published scholarship is telling of the field's status, expectations, and interests: The discipline struggles with its identity, and new media articles are representative of that struggle.

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In her article, "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention," Cynthia Selfe (1999) developed an argument that first appeared in her 1997 Chair's Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). She argued rhetoric and compositionists have "relegated these technologies [computers, digital networks, and related topics] into the background of our professional lives" (p. 413). Yet she maintained, "Allowing ourselves the luxury of ignoring technology, however, is not only misguided at the end of the 20th century, it is dangerously shortsighted" (p. 414). Selfe's article has been a catalyst for various discussions about technological issues in rhetoric and composition, especially that of new media's position in the discipline and what incorporating new media implies about the field's status.

Later, in 2004, also in a published piece developing out of a CCCC Chair's Address, Kathleen Blake Yancey echoed Selfe's words. She claimed, "The consequence of [non-academic writing and the impact technologies have on emerging genres] is the creation of a writing public that, in development and in linkage to technology, parallels the development of a reading public in the 19th century" (2004, p. 298). Like Selfe, Yancey suggested the field was largely moving away from studying academic writing because such writing was no longer as crucial to the writing public. Instead, the onus of rhetoric and composition is to understand what writing means—broadly construed—outside of the academy.

In a society saturated by information and information technologies, new media cannot be ignored by academia, as Selfe (1999) noted, because digital technologies are constantly evolving: We find ourselves currently using tablet computers and apps on smartphones to compose, and such technologies enable us to view more (digital) media. With these shifting means of production and presentation, the question of what counts as "writing" is fraught. The field of rhetoric and composition consistently takes on the tension between evolving writing technologies and the idea of "writing" through its published scholarship: Scholars engage in publically recorded, professional conversations about what counts as new media, how new media is related to writing, and how new media impacts the field's development.

In this piece, I examine new media's growth in the field as one way to understand how the field defines itself and how new media fits into that self-definition. My research suggests rhetoric and composition is a fluid discipline, often incorporating a variety of terms, theories, and concepts from other disciplines. New media is one such term, but unlike others, new media has no stable disciplinary definition; rather, its definition is constantly shifting, making new media an appropriate site for studying the fluctuating knowledge of the discourse community. Additionally, because it has the potential to incorporate so many elements, new media represents the current growth of rhetoric and composition as a discipline encompassing a spectrum of writing-related interests. Although scholars such as Ellen Barton (1994) and Chris Moran (2003) have described rhetoric and composition's ongoing discussions of technology and technology-related writing in the field as either discussions of the wariness we must foster toward technology or else our whole-hearted embracing of it, I set forth a different perspective on what our scholarly discussions of new media (and, thus, technology and writing) really demonstrate about the field. In this piece, I argue that, when discussing new media, the field displays an identity struggle: Through discussions of new media, scholars grapple with the field's representation (both within and outside of the rhetoric and composition community). Drawing on Robert Connors's (1997) metaphor, the field's self-definition is its avatar. In the 2000s, the avatar is a set of *composing frameworks* or parameters that explain what *composition* means in particular situations.

Examining the published scholarship on new media in four of the discipline's journals—*College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*), *Research in the Teaching of English* (*RTE*), *Computers and Composition* (*C&C*), and *Kairos*—allows me to analyze categories of scholarly conversations incorporating new media (please note that in this piece, I am *not* examining the ways we define new media or definitional impact on our scholarship). My research suggests scholars engage in three overarching types of scholarly conversations incorporating new media: conversations about *composing in contemporary society, composing in the university*, and *composing in the discipline* (see Table 1 under "Results"). Each categorization points to one way rhetoric and composition scholars seek to make the field's current avatar relevant to the society, the university, and their own community of scholars. Each of these categories is a situation in which composing must be contextualized—together, the categories demonstrate a framework for composing that emphasizes situation-specific elements and components of composition. In this piece, I argue that conversations about composing in contemporary society are the main venue for discussions of new media. Further, this conversational strain demonstrates how scholars seek to *define the discipline* via a *composing framework* that showcases the field's tensions with and understandings of its identity. This tension is not a negative tension, however, as it pushes the field to discover and explain its relevancy to a broad audience. Composing in contemporary society is a conversation that contributes to a diverse identity by pinpointing the relevancy of composition for 21st-century citizens.