Grammatization: Bernard Stiegler's Theory of Writing and Technology

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Abstract

This article explicates and probes the ways in which media theorist Bernard Stiegler drew on histories and theories of writing in order to enrich the study of digital culture. For digital rhetoricians, Stiegler's notion of "grammatization" is particularly striking in that it suggests the beginnings of a theoretical framework for orienting rhetorical inquiry amid the interminable sea-change of new devices, software packages, and product features. Grammatization cultivates a perspective that is complimentary to *and ultimately distinct from* those associated with electracy, augmentation, remediation, and other canonical terms that rhetoricians and compositionists often borrow from media studies in order to frame their analyses of digital writing technologies. This alternative approach, which Stiegler's own work models, can help digital rhetoricians to distinguish "the long-term processes of transformation from spectacular but fleeting technical innovations" (Stiegler, 1998, p. 21) and—going beyond Stiegler—to identify robust categories of analysis and production integral to a variety of contemporary rhetorical situations. To further demonstrate the scholarly value grammatization poses for rhetorical inquiry on writing technologies, the article concludes by comparing Stiegler's examination of online video platforms to two compositionists' recent analyses of YouTube.
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> "During [the] period that gave birth to the West, therefore, the question was to know what interpretation to give to that form of grammatization that was unfolding at that time. . Today, this question remains intact."
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> –Bernard Stiegler, Decadence of Industrial Democracies, p. 40

1. Permanent innovation

Have you ever wondered, upon completing an essay about new technology X, how relevant the piece will be when it actually gets published? In August 2013, Apple board members voiced concerns about the company's pace of innovation, insisting that it had been over two years since the release of their last "game-changing product" (Pachal, 2013). While a two-year lapse may be cause for complaint in Silicon Valley, two years is perhaps the average work span of an academic article from draft to publication. In some cases it is much longer still. Alas, the pace of scholarship is slow—appropriately so—and the rate of technological change is literally exponential. This equation can be troubling

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for those of us who write about digital writing technologies. Sometimes it feels like we are playing the stock market or even gambling, pinning our research careers to whatever stream of technical invention we think (and hope) will matter most for the future of writing, rhetoric, literacy, and pedagogy. Of course, the *we* I am evoking here is also growing rapidly. Each year of the new millennium has contributed even more new devices and software than the previous year, and every year more humanities scholars ransack their disciplinary traditions in order to make sense of digital culture. Assuming these two trends continue, perhaps the more pertinent question is this: How can scholarly inquiry on emerging media and writing technologies thrive in an era of permanent innovation?

The notion of "permanent innovation" plays a fundamental role in Bernard Stiegler's three-volume series, *Technics and Time*, which several media theorists (Crogan, 2010; Frabetti, 2011; Hansen, 2004; Robertson, 2013) regard to be among the most important books of the past twenty-five years.[1] Simply put, permanent innovation names a historical condition in which technical invention outpaces cultural adaptation (Stiegler, 1998, p. 15). This is not to suggest that technology and culture are divisible; for Stiegler, all social practices and institutions have a technological basis. Precisely because of this interdependence, the adoption of a new cultural technology precipitates the obsolescence, to greater and lesser degrees, of traditions that were developed in conjunction with the affordances of a becoming-obsolete technology. While this sort of technocultural evolution is evident throughout history, technical invention became infused with entirely unprecedented levels of resources and investments starting with the industrial revolution, during which economic incentives abounded to transform scientific knowledge from an academic pursuit into a lucrative industrial research and development enterprise (Stiegler, 1998, p. 40). As such, industrial technical invention has come to outpace conceptual innovation in other social systems such as law, government, and education.

The computer revolution continues to intensify this rift as industrial activities turn toward the production of information technologies that archive, manage, and structure individual and collective memory. The rapid evolution of global networks increasingly disorients and scrambles the traditions, conventions, and practices that have defined national institutions over previous centuries. Stiegler (1998) described this widespread sense of disorientation:

> [W]e are experiencing the deep opacity of contemporary technics; we do not understand what is being played out in technics, nor what is being transformed therein, even though we unceasingly have to make *decisions* regarding technics. . [I]n day to day technical reality, we cannot spontaneously distinguish the long-term processes of transformation from spectacular but fleeting technical innovations. (p. 21)

In other words, we often struggle to pinpoint exactly what is new about new media and, even more importantly, we have difficulty determining which novel aspects will be the most transformative and consequential for cultural development.

In what follows, I contend that Stiegler's work marks the leading edge of current efforts to draw on histories and theories of writing in order to enrich the study of emerging media and digital culture. Whereas his remarks on permanent innovation identify a problem many of us encounter all too often, his concept of *grammatization* suggests the beginnings of a theoretical framework for orienting rhetorical inquiry amid the interminable sea-change of new devices, software packages, product features, etc. In looking at the way Stiegler examines specific writing/media technologies—and first understanding the theoretical exigencies motivating his method—we can be in a better position to generate insights that will remain relevant and suggestive even after the examples we reference (a website, device, app, etc.) have faded out of general use, or disappeared entirely.

Of course, Stiegler's approach is not the only model with which digital rhetoricians may grapple with constant change. Readers familiar with Gregory Ulmer's grammatological texts will notice profound affinities between his and Stiegler's comparable objectives. Both draw heavily on Jacques Derrida as they discuss (and invent) new media practices in the context of previous technocultural shifts. One might also wonder if Stiegler's concept of grammatization differs significantly from Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's (2000) notion of remediation (which is indebted to Marshall McLuhan's, 1988, "tetrad of media effects"). Indeed, each approach aims to understand the effects and affordances of emerging media via critical comparisons with more established media. Addressed to the field of computers and

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[1] As one of the earliest American readers of Stiegler, Mark Hansen (2004) has gone so far as to claim that the wake of Stiegler's research "has the consequence of transforming cultural studies into *techno*cultural studies" (para. 5). And yet, because most of Stiegler's major texts have only recently appeared in English, his work remains a relatively untapped resource for contemporary media theory in America, and researchers in rhetoric and composition have published next to nothing about him thus far.