Programming in Network Exchanges

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Abstract

This article asks whether or not Manuel Castells's (2009) *programming*, or the act of setting the goals and values of a network, influences the rhetorical and compositional potential of networked writing. The author argues that as networked writing becomes more prevalent, researchers must investigate not only the ways in which traditional rhetoric and writing present themselves within networks, but also the particular features of networks that uniquely determine the rhetorical impact of the form, or, as Ian Bogost (2007) put it, "how inscription works" within networks (p. 24). The case study for answering this question is a network exchange that occurred on Twitter in July 2008 after a sitting U.S. congressman stated that the leadership of the House of Representatives was attempting to censor the use of social media by House members. The author examines the over 1,700 messages in this exchange to determine both the nature of this network's program as well as if this program affected the rhetorical and compositional features of the exchange.

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Networked writing has been a topic of nearly continuous interest in the computers and writing community for almost a quarter century, and this interest has been influential in challenging researchers to modify existing understandings of compositional and rhetorical practice. Where Linda Flower and John R. Hayes (1981) found that writers frequently "radically simplif[y]" (p. 369) the rhetorical problems present in writing situations, computers and writing researchers have shown how networked writing, by highlighting the role of the audience and privileging collaboration and inter-action, encourages writers to embrace the complexity of writing situations. As Rebecca Wilson Lundin (2008) argued, "[b]y viewing writing as a networked activity," it is easier for writers to "focus on the connectivity and complexity of rhetorical situations" rather than viewing writing as the "decontextualized product of a single, isolated worker" (p. 432), or, one could add, a single, isolated text. Recently, Joseph Moxley (2008) argued that writing pedagogy should replicate real-world networked writing, avoiding top-down structures and focusing on the role of communities and peer learning in teaching and education, and other researchers have argued that networks have altered the attentional and compositional resources of writing students via mobile computing (Mueller, 2009), social networking (Maranto & Barton, 2010), and wikis (Lundin, 2008). Yet, these studies focused more on the ways in which traditional writing activities and instruction had been altered by networking technologies, rather than the unique influences of networks on rhetorical practices. In his review of the inadequacy of then-current theories of digital rhetorics to explain the effects of computing on persuasion, Ian Bogost (2007) claimed that rhetoric and composition researchers have approached digital rhetorics merely as a "modified versio[n] of existing oral and written discourse" (p. 25), and this approach fails to account for "the unique properties of computation" (p. 26). "To convincingly propose a new domain for rhetoric" (p. 25), Bogost wrote, researchers must "identify how inscription works" within that domain and "how arguments

can be constructed through those modes of inscription" (2007, p. 24). Though Bogost acknowledged that focusing on the ways that oral or written rhetorics are influenced by emerging media technologies is a valuable endeavor, if such studies do not focus on the particulars of the medium in question, they remain descriptions of how "traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion function" within that medium (Bogost, 2007, p. 25).

I agree with Bogost that such traditional studies are valuable, but medium-specific studies must also focus on the particular features that determine how "inscription works" within that medium if they are to be more than simply extensions of traditional theory into new domains (Bogost, 2007, p. 24). While the ways in which network structures influence writing pedagogy or the essay are important, as Moxley (2008) pointed out, "we cannot dismiss the millions and millions of authors who are toiling away online, developing their ideas and helping others develop ideas" using network tools (p. 199). In line with Bogost's arguments, Jeff Rice (2009) examined "network exchanges" (p. 296), or compositional practices that "distribute writing across authors and places of writing," identifying the "principle of response" (p. 296)—rather than the closure inherent in traditional forms of writing—as a defining feature of this networked writing. There has been a long history of interest in network exchanges, ranging from ambivalence (Faigley, 1992) to revolutionary enthusiasm (Kemp, 1995), but as this writing becomes more widespread (Moxley, 2008, p. 199) and network theory matures, we are increasingly able to examine how inscription works within networks. This leads not only to an understanding of how "traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion"—or compositional practices, for that matter—"function" in network exchanges, but also to an understanding of the unique effects of those networks on those rhetorical practices (Bogost, 2007, p. 25).

In this article, I ask if the rhetorical and compositional features of network writing are influenced by a property of networks that Manuel Castells (2009) called *programming*. Castells defined programming as setting the "goals" and "rules of performance" for a network (2009, p. 20). In his use of this term, Castells did not mean the writing and implementing computer code, as one might program a word processing application. Rather, networks are programmed via a combination of cultural and social influences. While literal programs are made of computer code, networks are both technological and cultural, consisting of "socialized communication" (Castells, 2009, p. 53), and their programs are determined by the "values and interests" of the "social actors" (p. 20) who are instrumental in creating the network and influencing the "discourses"—or writings—"that frame human action" via networks (Castells, 2009, p. 53). In the following analysis, *programming* will not refer to coding but to the "values and interests" of network users and the influence of the resulting programs on network exchanges. As this description suggests, the term *network* encompasses more than computer networking. While digital interactions have come to be characterized by networks, networks predate digital technologies, existing in interpersonal relationships and other manifestations of cultural experience. Following Bruno Latour (2005), Rice (2011) wrote, networks are not "something you look for and identify"; rather a network "is the process of figuring out agency, influence, connectivity, and other factors in a given moment or situation" (p. 29). Latour himself described the network as, "a trace left behind by some moving agent" (2005, p. 132), and Rice argued, "describ[ing]" these traces as a part of composition and rhetoric research will "reveal unknown relationships" and thereby give an account of the network and the way it influences rhetorical practices (2011, p. 29). Castells's work has been widely influential, describing both the technological and cultural influences of networks on society, yet the question of whether or not programming—which Castells identified as one of the two "basic mechanisms" of network power (2009, p. 45)—affects the actual practices of network writers remains largely unanswered. If such a key feature of networks does not affect network writing, we may legitimately ask if, on the one hand, networks generate unique compositional and rhetorical effects or, on the other, if the network is simply a medium in which "traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion function" (Bogost, 2007, p. 25). If programming does influence networked writing, as we endeavor to theorize the work of the "millions and millions" of network writers, an analysis of that influence will give researchers a fuller understanding of the effects of network structures on those writers' activities (Moxley, 2008, p. 199). Following Latour (2005) and Rice (2011), in this study I define the network as "a trace left behind by some moving agent" (Latour, 2005, p. 132), and my process is to trace the network exchange enacted by a 2008 message posted by U.S. Congressman John Culberson to Twitter, the microblogging and social networking site, in which Culberson argued that the House leadership was attempting to censor his and other congressperson's use of social media. I begin by defining the program of the wider Twitter network wherein this network exchange existed, and then I ask if that program influenced the program of the exchange and, ultimately, the way in which Culberson presented his claims and how they were received.