

Keeping Pace with Obama's Rhetoric: Digital Ecologies in the Writing Program and the White House¹

The call for this panel asked directly: "How can we leverage President Obama's embrace of digital media to promote our own efforts to use digital media in the writing program?" I responded because Obama's use of digital media during the campaign had inspired me to design an assignment sequence that covered his inauguration. I asked my students to explore the rhetoric of the inauguration as it appeared in what Barbara Warnick calls the electronic public sphere (*Critical Literacy*). In January of 2009 I was curious whether the widespread participation that Obama's campaign promoted through digital media, online communications and social networking would carry over to the inauguration: a traditional rhetorical event designed for older forms of media distribution. Like Warnick, I wondered whether the new administration's "use of the World Wide Web and other new media" would "foster citizen involvement, open deliberation, and public participation in policy formation" (*Rhetoric Online* 8). In retrospect, of course, I see that my expectations were unrealistically high. In this presentation, I consider some of the limitations I faced in my digital assignment sequence and how those relate to

¹ This essay is informed by a volume edited by Dickie Selfe, Heidi McKee and Danielle DeVoss titled *Technological Ecologies & Sustainability*. The editors expand the "digital ecology" metaphor from the world of computers and writing to ask us to consider how and why we maintain both curriculum and technology in the writing program. They encourage us to recognize that a variety of "environmental" factors work inter-dependently within the writing program to direct and transform the aims of student learning. To shift one's focus to the digital, presidential and civic is therefore a project that must be implemented both systematically and at the level of individual classroom instruction and assignment development. The ecology metaphor has helped me to think about how writing program administrators can leverage President Obama's embrace of digital media in order to move the aims of the technology, training and pedagogy of the writing program beyond simply "keeping pace" with digital media and toward a full engagement with the new realities of socially networked writing practices. The metaphor has also helped me consider how my own efforts to introduce digital media and presidential rhetoric into my writing classroom are colored, limited and could be expanded by the broader institutional paradigm in which the writing program operates.

not just the limitations of Obama's rhetoric but also to our ability to fully exploit the affordances of digital media from within the paradigm of the writing program.

In reflecting on my experience of Obama's digital rhetoric in the writing classroom I focus on two related elements in order to deconstruct the assumptions about the nature of digital rhetoric and of political participation that I brought to my assignment sequence. First, I acknowledge the contradictions inherent in defining presidential politics as a realm of public participation. Obama's campaign promised, and in some very visible examples delivered, a new kind of political participation using digital media. However, voting and associated campaign efforts do not align exactly with the kind of public participation implied by Warnick's definition of the electronic public sphere as a place where responsible citizenship extends to public deliberation and policy formation. In fact, participation as a voter in the polis, especially in the realm of presidential politics, may be one of the most limited, if most visible, venues in which citizens exercise their rights and duties. On the other hand, if we adopt Kenneth Burke's definition of rhetoric as a general *body of identifications*, as Warnick does (*Rhetoric Online* 70), then we should not be so quick to dismiss presidential politics as an inconsequential realm of limited political activity. In fact, participating in an identification with a presidential campaign or inauguration can lead to a series of rhetorically motivated actions and decisions. My students and I sought to explore the production and distribution of this citizen created "body of identifications" in our assignment sequences. This expanded definition of rhetorical identification; one that many of us saw during the expansion of Obama's presidential campaign was also applicable to the excitement of the

inauguration. Burke's definition allowed me to include participation in digitally mediated social networks and the consumption, production and reproduction of digital media as legitimate forms of participation in presidential politics. What should be troubling here, then, is that, following Burke's formulation, it is possible to "participate" in politics without ever exercising the responsibilities of citizenship, such as participating in truly deliberative interactions or contributing in any meaningful way to policy formulation—hence the contradictions of aligning meaningful participation with presidential politics in any media.

However, Burke's expanded definition of rhetoric invokes *some* form of participation at least through identification (or dis-identification) as soon as the topic of presidential politics enters the writing classroom. Therefore, one response to Obama's digital rhetoric may be to shift the infrastructure of training and curriculum to equip and authorize writing program participants to explore digital writing as not just an academic exercise but also a form of public responsibility. And, if we do leverage Obama's digital rhetoric to promote public participation among students then we must decide how to fully exploit the affordances of digital media to promote that participation. Like presidential politics, digital media offer the opportunity to promote substantive civic engagement in the writing classroom, but so then do service learning courses and other forms of community engagement that have been explored in writing programs. The key difference to leveraging both digital media and presidential rhetoric is therefore the definition and support of

goals within the writing program that would promote student's use of writing and digital media to explore and enact civic responsibilities.²

Keeping the questions of digital rhetoric and political participation in mind, I'd like to turn to an analysis of my assignment sequence and how my students and I struggled to find a way to meaningfully engage the inauguration. To design this assignment, I used a mix of old and new paradigm thinking about the role of digital writing in political participation. I asked students to design a multimedia report on the inauguration for the campus newspaper web site. I asked students to imagine the project as a "human interest" story with a digital media angle -rather than as a front-page account of the event. And I requested that students bring some critical perspective from the course readings to bear on their findings. Our class met the morning of the event and we began by viewing live streams from Washington. We practiced techniques for searching and capturing images and audio from the web and for recording screen activity. We closed the class session by discussing what we were seeing and experiencing in the digital broadcast of this public event. Here the "technological ecology" of our classroom, my own training, student expectations and the civic institutions of the newspaper and the inauguration all shaped the possible interpretations we might give to the digital rhetoric of the event.

Students did respond to the assignment with a critical eye. Not content to simply repackage or report on what they saw in the inaugural coverage they asked questions about the persuasive or even coercive nature of the campaign's and

² In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse* Christopher Weisser explores how an expanded concept of the public in the composition classroom promotes writing as an "act of social engagement". Weisser usefully defines the terms of engagement for developing effective studies of public writing in the classroom. However, he stops short of encouraging actual civic participation as an element of classroom practice.

administration's participation in social media. They investigated the limitations of the cellular technology that many relied on to provide firsthand reports of the events. And they asked what "change" was really evident in the wide broadcast of a traditional event like the inaugural ball. They investigated the content of the social media that did visibly demonstrate some form of participation – scrolling Facebook updates on the CNN homepage for instance, or the opportunity to cut and paste Aretha Franklin's famous hat onto the profile photos of friends and family—a phenomenon that one student responded to with an enigmatic composition that acknowledged the disrespect, cultural ignorance and participatory exuberance evident in the travels of the famous hat. These projects reflected many of the critical perspectives on digital media we had read about and offered insights that I recognized from other studies of digital rhetoric. We had mastered what Stuart Selber calls the *functional* literacy of composing with digital media and the *critical* literacy of self-aware analysis of the influence of that technology. But we were still working in a defensive mode, using our understanding of digital rhetoric to protect ourselves from the rhetoric of the event. We had not reached what Selber calls a level of *rhetorical* literacy. In the robust technological environment of our laboratory classroom, with the support of a presidential exemplar, we had not had the opportunity to design true interactions with an audience that acted directly upon, that truly spoke back to, the mediating influences of the technologies and institutions that had already been designed for us.

As an instructor, I became very aware of the limitations of our "participation". For the most part we experienced the event as consumers of digital

media. Yet, we also produced our own unique readings and responses. We viewed and discussed these together as a class. Students had the opportunity to post their responses publicly on YouTube, but they were not required to do so. As I reflect on the assignment outcomes, I don't conclude that the public display of their creations would have actually closed the loop and allowed students to more fully participate in the event. The structural problems with "reading" and "responding to" digital rhetoric go deeper than this. In the classroom, we were still in the mode of academic research and writing.

The president's example led my students and I to successfully engage in a media-rich dialogic response to the inaugural events. We learned about the institution of the inauguration and about the scope and reach and function of digital media production technologies. However, the student work, and the inaugural event of presidential, rather than campaign, digital rhetoric, drew my attention to the limits of this dialogic work. In a review of Warnick's approach to *Rhetoric Online* Michael Halloran usefully distinguishes between the dialogism afforded by digital media and true interactivity in digitally mediated environments (203). Dialogism, the Bakhtinian term for when a reader or writer brings together the meaning of one or more texts to create new meanings for both, is enhanced by bringing texts created in multiple media into the writing classroom. The dialogic model allows students to remix and respond to digital rhetoric using tools for multimedia production. However, in contrast to this dialogic model digital media also pushes us to consider how students might create meaningfully interactive and participatory texts in the digitally networked spaces of the electronic public sphere. The real

potential of digital media to allow students to interact with and manipulate both texts and actors that operate beyond the classroom is now a potential of the digitally connected writing program. But our assignments, training and expectations are still focused on dialogic composition, ignoring the opportunities for truly substantive and consequential interaction that digital media now affords.

According to a 2009 report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, these limitations are not unique to the writing program. The study finds that social responsibility and civic participation are, in fact, key learning outcomes on many college campuses. Faculty and undergraduates alike expect education in social responsibility and civic participation. Yet, the report finds that most faculty and students acknowledge a gap between “aspiration and actuality” (Schmidt). For many of us, the expectations for training in civic participation extend to the writing program where rhetoric, argumentation and modes of composition all contribute to citizens’ abilities to participate in politics and public life in general. Digital media allows us to access the networks and “multimedia languages of the screen” (Daly) that comprise the electronic public sphere.

However, simply “keeping pace” with digital rhetoric by importing presidential exemplars into our digital media classrooms does not ensure that students are fully exploiting the opportunities for participation that digital media afford. Further, we must continue to question the nature of the participation that we are promoting. In a major study of digital media and presidential politics, published in 2005 in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Philip Howard draws on ethnographic research gathered between 1996 and 2002 to

examine the role of digital technology in political life. It is tempting to dismiss the study as already out of date, especially in the wake of web 2.0 social technologies. Yet, Howard's conclusions illuminate both the limitations and potentials of the responses I saw to presidential digital rhetoric in my own classroom. Howard suggests that democracy is "deeper" in the digital age, due to the broader diffusion of rich information and the diversity of actors now afforded access to the public sphere through digital technology. Yet he also finds that citizenship is "thinner", less meaningful, in digital environments, where "people can become politically expressive without being substantively engaged"(153). Howard's study finds that the cultivation of a public audience through digital media does not necessarily make political participation more substantive. In fact, his study finds the opposite, the relative anonymity and the ephemeral nature of online communication has, he finds, actually weakened, or thinned, the connections between political participation and citizenship.

As an instructor, my experience with Obama's digital rhetoric leads me to conclude that we still have much to learn about the purpose and potential of digital media composition in the writing classroom. The 2009 AACU study of civic education found that opportunities for teaching civic responsibility are often confined to general education and freshman experience programs – courses like my introduction to digital media composition. Education in civic participation obviously reaches many students, but the study suggests that these students recognize that their actual social responsibility is still thin. President Obama is an example of how presidential rhetoric extends the reach of digital media in the classroom into the

polis and potentially the electronic public sphere. However, it remains our responsibility as local actors to design and promote the environments where instructors and students explore the consequences and potentials of digital rhetoric as a mode of substantively engaged political participation. We may leverage the president's use of digital rhetoric, but that rhetoric does not ensure that students will see their digital writing activities in the classroom as consequential political actions. My students' successful critical examination of the inauguration still needs to find a home in their experiences of themselves as engaged citizens. Taking advantage of the expanded public audiences offered by digital media may be one way of doing this. But students may also need to see themselves as connected to a full curriculum that is working to move them toward engaged citizenship. Attending to the findings of reports like Philip Howard's and the AACU survey can help guide us in making decisions about how to leverage Obama's digital rhetoric so that we can lead in the development of meaningful experiences of digital rhetoric in the writing program.

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