

## Citizen Voices in Cyberpolitical Culture

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“We cannot cram the world of tomorrow into yesterday’s conventional cubbyholes.” --Alvin Toffler in Masters of the Wired World (22)

I take as the text for today’s sermon Alvin Toffler’s sententious articulation of where we are in time and space, which is to say, where we are not at-present. We live neither in yesterday nor in tomorrow, but in a liminal today. The culture of today, to most futurists, stands between a fluid, inventible tomorrow and an ossified, conventional yesterday. For those of us from rhetorical and communication disciplines, the yesterday that was the twentieth century was the era of modernist politics running on mechanically reproduced images—political posters, photography and photojournalism, silent then sound film. It then evolved into the era of electronically reproduced sounds and images, as we adapted personal and public political life especially in the West to the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and the early years of the computer. Politically, it was the culture of whistle-stop campaigning and governing from afar giving way to the newsreel in local theatres, the radio and television broadcasts into our homes, and telegraphic, telephonic, and 9-digit Zip code sorted mail access to centers of power and political process.

But now? What of now? “The dominant change taking place in the advanced economies,” Toffler intones, “is a shift from mass societies based on brute force technologies to de-massified societies that, like the new economy, are much more granular, internally differentiated, more complex and fast moving” (23). The so-called de-massified societies, to both Toffler and Gronbeck, are on the edge of a political revolution. It is a revolution more significant than the bottom-up rebellions of the second half of the twentieth century. The uhuru movement that decolonized Africa, the civil rights movements that struck at America’s racism, sexism, and classism, the Solidarity movement that spread from Poland to most of the rest of the western hemisphere, even the democracy movement that made Tiananmin Square a metaphor for political resistance—all of these movements, while dear to my heart, comprise less significant changes in citizen-oriented political activity than what we will be experiencing in the cyberpolitical world of tomorrow.

I may be a child of the ‘60s, my ears still may ring with “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today,” and I may long for the teach-ins and public interest research groups that were a part of the University of Michigan culture when I took my first job there. But, I believe that I ain’t seen nothin’ yet, and neither have you.

I want to tackle this conference’s theme, “Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement,” by viewing it from a cyberpolitical perspective. I am a rhetorician by training. More than that, I am a rhetorician who clings to the axiom that governing is a quitessentially symbolic activity. Yes, politics involves institutionalized redistribution of resources via what some political scientists label rational choices. But, those resources are valued or not thanks to discursive meaning-making, the debates leading to rational choices are vigorously argumentative exercises, and both talk among

political players and interactions between the political elite and their constituents depend rhetorically on what Kenneth Burke called dancing an attitude. Rhetoricians make their livings on what the conference theme calls discursive practices within governmental systems—systems viewed, not as structures, but as communication channels.

And yes, I am interested in civic engagement, more precisely, in citizen-based political activity, and still more precisely, in what counts as political activity in our time. A dozen years ago, I published my first essay on what I termed “electric rhetoric” (Gronbeck, “Electric”), which I took to be rhetorical-political practice as conditioned by radio, film, television, and the computer. At that time, I focused primarily on characteristics of political messages and our experience of them based on how they were adapted to America's culturally conditioned systems of mass media. Then five years later, I did another essay (Gronbeck, “Rhetoric”) more broadly on various dimensions of what I called tele-spectacle: the multimeditated, electronically mediated, narrativized connections between politicians and their constituents in a fractured political world where coalition- or constituency-building is the heart of the process of gaining power through citizen assent.

But, what I have not attempted to do before is to muse conceptually about civic engagement per se in a digital world--that is, about citizen activity that can and even must be termed political as it is exercised via the World Wide Web. I want to try that today, working at a hopelessly airy level, seeking only to provide a framework within which to build arguments about citizen voices in our time. First, I will sketch in narrative form a vision of the traditional political world in the west, a world beholding to the Greek, the Roman, and especially the British experience with the polis and the demos. Second, against that backdrop I will examine recent citizen activities on the Internet that I'll urge you to call “political,” so that I can, in the third place, reconceptualize the idea of “political activity,” and more particularly, the notion of citizen voices in political spheres. That should allow me to conclude with a sermonette on where the World Wide Web might take studies of citizen engagement in an digitized rhetorical democracy.

### Evolving Conceptions of Politics

It is tempting, of course, to begin a story of the idea of citizenship with Plato, where, in dialogues such as Statesman he depicts human beings as animals interested only in bodily needs and pleasures and as deficient in the knowledge needed to run an orderly world (Jowett 349-359). Or, I could review The Republic and its discussions of excessive liberty or of the economic destruction of the political that can happen in a loosely run democracy (ibid., 328-337). Actually, I will come back to those views later. But, more constructively, I prefer to begin with Aristotle, particularly his Politics. I would frame the telos of western politics with the famous passage at the end of his discussion of citizenship in Book 3, where he is articulating a relationship between the governor and the governed. He says:

But prudence is the only virtue peculiar to the ruler. The others, it would seem, must necessarily be common to both rulers and ruled, but prudence is not a virtue of one ruled, but rather true opinion; for the one ruled is like a flute maker, while the ruler is like a flute player, the user (of what the other makes). [92]

Here, the word for prudence, of course, is phronêsis, and for true opinion, doxa aletheia. Grounded in the flute metaphor is, I would argue, the pre-modern foundation of western

political ideals. The êthea or folkways of a people are depicted here as containing doxa or opinion powerful enough to demand of their leader phronêsis or prudence. The governor can play a little music, but only within the tonalities approved by the citizenry.

Set deeply into western political thought, especially within the treatise or handbook tradition, therefore, is an understanding of a collective socio-moral space within which political acts are executed. And, as we move from Aristotle's Politics to Cicero's work on moral duties, De officiis, that space becomes more sharply defined. To Cicero, the general virtues undergirding politics are wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance, which in turn can be broken into a full alphabet of subsidiary virtues—from affability, ambition, beneficence, and brotherhood to sociality, steadfastness, stoicism, and utility. Now, to be sure, Machiavelli in The Prince (ch. 15) noted that virtues could be the ruin of and vices, the source of security and prosperity for, the state. But, conceptually, Machiavelli did not prevail.

So, for hundreds of years, politics in the west was understood as the study of moral rule by governors steeped in the doxa aletheia of their people. Politics, which dealt with the affairs of status civitatis, were to operate within a moral space paralleling that of the status ecclesiae. The realm temporal was understood as homologous to the realm spiritual. I don't have to tell you, of course, that few governors lived their civic lives in accordance with wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. But, the west certainly was committed to such ideals even in the eras in which something near to absolute rule was the order of the day. A citizen could only hope that the status civitatis would be governed by devout and not wrathful lieutenants of the Lord.

But then came the modernist state. Both in understanding it as a complex organism, as did Thomas Hobbs in The Leviathan (1660), and in arguing that political power was reciprocally shared by rulers and the ruled, as did John Locke in his Second Treatise on Government (1690), western principalities were reconceived in highly significant ways. Slowly but surely, the focus on governing the state morally metamorphosized into the idea of managing the state politically (pace Palonen).

Government came to be understood as an organismic institution operating in time and space. The nation-state was conceived of as a rationalized space, subdivided into major units, each of which was further subdivided again and again, until one could access the smallest unit—say, a borough in England or a precinct in the American system. Citizens, in turn, had varied political rights and responsibilities in regard to each of those spaces, spelled out in constituting documents at the national, state or county, and local levels. Furthermore, political time was stabilized with equal rationality. Parliaments sat for specified periods, both during the year and through a series of years that constituted a sitting. Elections regularly were held—at least in most western countries by the eighteenth century—as leaders reached down to the led for electoral legitimation. Even when the elections offered little in the way of choice, they gave material form to the idea of governing as established on the consent of the governed.

Political processes in parliaments and legislatures likewise were rationalized and stabilized. Parliamentary procedure created symbolic space between antagonists and complex rituals for controlling legislative activity (Gronbeck, “Symbolic”). The rule of law took form as legal historians such as Coke and Blackstone in the British tradition codified judicial procedure. And so, the branches of western governments—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial—were cultured, that is, symbolically

constructed within a web of substantive and procedural rules that controlled their public activity. Never mind the regular violations of those procedures—again, it is their presence, not their universal observation, that is important to our understanding of western conceptions of politics.

In contemplating these conceptions of popular sovereignty, consider, for example, the case of Edmund Burke. Most of his political life he held a safe seat, a so-called pocket borough, Malton in Yorkshire. But in 1774, he was put forward as a candidate for Bristol, a city where electors actually voted. Flattered, Burke ran for the seat. As he talked to the electors of Bristol in November of 1774, he obviously sensed pressures to represent their commercial interests in the House of Commons. That pressure he expressed in this way:

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion. Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of parliament.

This segment of the 1774 speech articulated what we have come to know as a theory of virtual representation. What I find more interesting, however, is the fact that Edmund Burke felt constrained to have to articulate it at all. In so-called popular boroughs, even before the American and French revolutions, a sense of citizen rights was in the air.

But how strong was it? What of the citizen? As the modernist state took shape, what happened to the citizen, the source of moral guidance that Aristotle and Cicero hoped would contain the agents of power and that Burke feared might presume to influence his votes?

My answer to these questions cannot be developed fully, but I hope that I can outline it with enough clarity to pique your interest. My answer is this: while Locke's compact theory of government seemingly ensconced popular legitimation processes in the heart of democratic theory, in fact it was the citizen, not the ruler, who was constrained and disciplined by western political operations. The mechanisms for such containment and discipline were numerous. Consider four:

1. Material requirements for the franchise. In 1647, Oliver Cromwell's Army officers held a two-day debate in the church at Putney about voting in England. What is interesting to contemporary ears listening to that debate is that not even the most radical Leveller, those requesting something close to universal suffrage,<sup>1</sup> could conceive of voting and hence citizenship as a right attached simply to the person. Rather, the debate actually revolved around material questions about how much freehold property one would have to own or how much tax a person would have to pay before being given voting rights (Emery). Rights and those holding them could be conceptualized only in terms of real assets.

2. Requirement for the presence of the body. By the eighteenth century in England, the franchise was exercised through public, physical presence. The election in Westminster in 1784, for example, went on forty-five days, and citizens voted by publicly signing their names. Now they could change their vote—and therein lay the corruptibility of the system—but only by reappearing and publicly signing the voting record again. Similarly, dividing the House of Commons in those days was a matter of moving one's body to one side or the other of St. Stephen's Chapel. They voted with their feet.
3. Demands for the absence of the body. The galleries of the House of Commons could be cleared whenever a Member of Parliament cried "I spy a stranger." Such strangers, of course, often were scribes surreptitiously taking notes on the proceedings—illegal until late in the nineteenth century. As well, citizens who engaged in political activities "out of doors," that is, not in buildings legitimized as houses for national, county, or local politics, could be fined or jailed. The fears of citizen activity in public places ran through centuries of British commentaries on politics.
4. The civic disciplining of the body. In Great Britain and elsewhere, the citizens' bodies were subjected to corporeal governmental control, to be flogged for misdemeanors, garreted when debts were unpaid or when declared insane, jailed when associated with more serious crimes, and hanged on festive public occasions when adjudged guilty of capital offenses (Lofland).

My point is, in the parliamentary-democratic governments that developed in the modernist era, the vox populi was muted and the body politic was strapped down. Modernist politics has regularly enacted Alexander Hamilton's judgment in Federalist No. 7 that "men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious," and the sentiments of William Livingston from the same period that "the people have been and ever will be unfit to retain the exercise of power in their own hands" (qtd. in Rimmerman 14). These views bring us full circle—back to Plato's Statesman and The Republic.

In sum, the modern political state was regularized via statute and precedent, ordered in time and space, and put in charge of citizens, who legitimated its existence, yes, yet also were subject to its discipline. Aristotle may have recognized that the household existed before the state and Locke may have argued that society's needs are prior to those of government's (see, e.g., Hauser 20-21), yet the modernist European and North American state, often in the name of social order, was strongly regulatory. Habermas (esp. Structural), as well, certainly was correct in identifying the eighteenth-century citizens' search for non-institutionalized political spaces as places to create publicity, that is, publicness, and even to constitute citizens as a "public," something that could generate and urge "public opinions" (see Hauser 34). The efficacy of those opinions, however, as mechanisms for making policy and creating a polity with a sense of its own well-being, is moot.

The story of the modern political state in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century operations is interesting, but I cannot pause to tell it. If I had time, I would talk about the mobilization, especially in the United States, of the electorate, primarily in three ways: by tribe, that is, on the basis of ethnic identification as in the Italian and the Irish votes; by client, that is, on the basis of the patronage and services big-city bosses could deliver

to their precincts; and by issue, as in the fight over greenbacks and the gold standard producing fractionated parties by 1896 (Piven and Cloward).

And if I had even more time, I would move to what I see happening to politics with the coming of mechanically and electrically reproduced sounds and images—the politics of posters, photography, radio, film, television, and the early days of the computer. The electoral and the governing processes now could be brought into the community and even the home in the forms of radio news and actualities, the radiocasts of Franklin Roosevelt, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin, larger-than-life newsreels and film documentaries, and live television reports, white papers and other forms of reality TV, and all of the other trappings of specular politics (Gronbeck, “Presidency,” “Rhetoric,” “Electric”).

And then, with even more time, I would talk about the development of one more electronic marvel within the political system: the public opinion poll. Developing from the salons of Paris in the eighteenth century and growing into a multi-billion dollar industry in our time, public opinion polling has produced what Susan Herbst calls “numbered voices”—scaled, quantified, rationalized, and publicized political requests and judgments sculpted by statisticians and then probed by political staffers for their mandates. Another member of this audience, Philip Davies, and I were part of a team examining the numbered voices featured in the New York Times and the Washington Post during the last two weeks of Campaign 2000 (Alsina, Davies, and Gronbeck). We found a stragging total of 270 stories built around polls over those fourteen days of campaign news, with only about 40% of them dealing with particular issues. The rest dealt with the horserace (who’s ahead and who’s behind), the military-like strategies of the candidates, and the theatrical performances crafted by candidates in the denouement of the campaign drama.

Were I, then, to have talked about nineteenth-century citizen mobilization, twentieth-century politics in the age of mechanical and electrical reproduction of images, and citizen voices that spout, not ideas, but percentages, I would have had perhaps a fitting end to my story of modernist politics. In the final pages of that story, the political actors become disembodied, producing what Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles just recently analyzed as hyperreal, imagaic, postmodern politics. As Sidney Blumenthal depicts “the permanent campaign,” the scramble for voter allegiance heightens the need to publicly exhibit governors in pictures and postures attractive to their constituents.

As well, those final pages would have to have talked about nineteenth-century tribalism, clientism, and issue-centered loyalties, all of which forced the literal mobilization of the body politic—a body giving way, however, to a blended sense of publicness. Yes, throughout the twentieth century, we continued to organize citizens into ideological parties, as with the Roosevelt Democrats and the Reagan Democrats, and into the sprawling issue-oriented movements and political action committees that we came to love and loathe in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, even as some beat the drum to organize peoples’ marches, actual political activity in the executive and legislative halls seemed more influenced by the numbered voices of the printout than the bull-horned voices of the streets. On many days, it seems as though a favorable poll would produce more response than a sit-in. On many days, the voice and the body politic mattered only in quantified form.

In our time, the last page of the story would announce that the modernist political machine is videocasting governors who are in dialogue with statistically sampled and segmented citizens. The voices of both governors and the governed are electronically modulated. But then, that perhaps is at it should be in the last days of the late-modernist model of democracy, when the economic sphere has become so much a part of the political sphere that the stakes are too high for the system to care much for the social sphere. And so public relations driven political communicators, even the great ones such as Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, meet a stratified sample of the citizenry, with its plus-or-minus three-point-five percent of error. They do lunch, then the governors return to dinner with Fortune 500 CEOs, and the governed return home Wednesday nights to watch NBC's liberal romance, The West Wing.

### Cyborg Citizen

Chris Hables Gray's new book, Cyborg Citizen, devotes a chapter to "Cybocracy, Mobocracy, and Democracy." In that chapter, Gray notes that the printing press is credited with jump-starting not only the Reformation but movements toward democratic, grassroots politics. Similarly, both Marshall McLuhan and, more recently, Robert Logan have argued that political awareness and rejuvenation were among the activities characteristic of the life created in the Global Village. And, wonders Gray, is it true "that computer technology might have the same cascade effects on politics" (41)?

To stalk that question, consider first the penetration of the Internet into American homes:

- As of September 2001, 143 million Americans—about 54 percent of the population—were using the Internet, with new users being added at a rate of more than 2 million per month (US DOC).
- Even among disadvantaged populations, Internet use has been increasing recently: 25 percent annual growth in the lowest-income households, 33 percent and 30 percent annual growth rates among African Americans and Hispanics respectively, and 24 percent annual growth rate for rural citizens, 53 percent of whom now are wired, equaling the population in general (ibid.).
- Forty-five percent of the population uses e-mail, and a third of the American populace searches for product and service information (ibid.). The other primary uses of the Web include general browsing, finding entertainment information, and reading news (Cole).
- More intriguingly, 72.3 percent of Americans—almost three-quarters—went online somewhere in 2001, averaging 9.8 hours per week. Further, 44.4 percent of those who were not connected to the Internet before expect to go online in 2002 (Cole).

And, to take this search for quantified citizenry one step farther, such surveys tell us even more about political uses of the Internet, power, and the potentials for political persuasion:

- Almost half (45.1%) of the Americans using the Internet agree that "by using the Internet people like you can better understand politics" (Cole 82).
- A quarter (25.6%) believe that "by using the Internet people like you can have more political power," while a fifth (20.9%) assume that "by using the

Internet people like you will have more say about what the government does” (ibid.).

- In March 2000—during the primary and caucus period of Campaign 2000—over a third (35%) of Internet users surveyed had used the ‘Net to find information about politics, and that percentage rose about almost half (46%) for so-called “veteran enthusiast” users (Horrigan).
- In late 2000—and remember of the post-Campaign 2000 debacle—seventeen percent of Internet users got political news online, about doubling the usual percentage, which supports the conclusion that heightened political interest can exert pressure on citizens to use their computers for political information-gathering (More Online).<sup>2</sup>
- Yet, from focus group research many believe that there is a significant gap between the information that Web audiences want and that which is being supplied by congressional office, committee, and leadership sites (Congress Online, 2002), which suggests that citizens are driven elsewhere for political information.

That last point, of course, is the intriguing one. More and more people are spending more and more time on the World Wide Web—so much so, as a matter of fact, that for the first time ever the amount of time the television set is on in the average American home per week is actually dropping. Maybe that’s because moms with kids under eighteen are averaging almost seventeen hours per week online—which is about five hours a week more than teenagers average (“Moms”). Yet, the focus group research suggests, citizens are not gaining the information they want from the representatives of the state. They’re going elsewhere, but where are those elsewheres?

That is something we don’t know for sure. As I said, the search for political news in particular picked up sharply near the end of Campaign 2000, but why? A survey done during that election (Youth Vote 1) suggested that politically interested Web users were looking for convenient information, more information than they found in other media, information not available in other media, and news sources that “reflect personal interests.” The next question, of course, is where are they going for more and convenient political information—especially that which reflects so-called “personal interests”? We don’t know.

In my studies of political websites during the last two presidential elections (Gronbeck, Politicking 1997, Politicking 2000), I noted that Yahoo! found about 1,000 political websites during Campaign 1996, but some 25,000 during Campaign 2000. I sorted them into such categories as those mounted by political parties and campaigners, political activist groups that fall into both major and fringe categories, political news services, professionals selling their campaign services, e-democracy or what sometimes are called “good government” groups, and sites featuring political humor, especially satire. The point I would make here is that this array of websites presents a variegated spectrum of political information and commitments.

The array allows you to get political news from CNN.com, the Republican or Democratic spin on CNN’s stories, not only the NRA or ACLU view on gun control but also that of the White Supremists and the Christian Action Network. And if the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has an opinion on that issue, you can bet it’s on their website—and, of course, given the violence against non-straight with hand guns, you

can bet that they do. And so, we have increasing numbers and more varied groups of citizens spending more time each election looking for political information—and I suspect frames for assessing political issues—on the Internet.

Now, given that we live in Putnam's era of Bowling Alone and his concern about the near-complete disintegration of social structures in the United States, the vision of a public finding connections with each other via e-mail, listservs, chat rooms and bulletin boards, MOOs, and ever more sophisticated computer-mediated interfaces might provide comfort on two grounds. For one thing, the citizens online are, as a matter of fact, seeking affiliation, perhaps personal and social identity, and, probably useful—what consultants call actionable—information. If the citizenry is electronically looking especially for politically relevant data and frames for those data, then it is engaged in a patently political activity in collectivist ways. This is important. For too long, we have taken a prototypically modernist-scientific position that political activity should be defined in strictly behavioral terms, and hence have focused almost exclusively on the number of bodies voting and showing up at public forums or protests. Surfing the 'Net with politics and politicalization on one's mind assuredly must be counted as a kind of political activity—and it is sharply on the rise.

Second, not only is political information-seeking a sign of health in the American polis, but it's also a sign of citizen independence. The Internet is an essentially unregulated discursive space—a place for free speech—and it's chaotic enough to make an effort at control it almost impossible. That is why futurists argue that “this new electronic communication will shift power from elites to the common people” (Davis 37). In this view, not only is the Web freeing, liberal in a political sense, but it also provides new avenues through which a citizenry can identify and call attention to its self-interested political agenda.

The Internet's very strengths as a political medium and as a site for politics itself, however, also could to be its greatest weaknesses.

1. It allows for ultratargeting (Selnow 191). If you're interested in abortion as a political issue, there are numerous sites where you can gather information about abortion-related legislative and bureaucratic activity, platforms of political candidates, news on fund-raisers and other rallies, e-mail lists of politicians you should be contacting. With no trouble at all, you can make abortion your issue, your political litmus test, especially if you use the computer service called NewsTracker to scan web periodicals devoted to your interests. The kind of ultratargeting possible on the Internet may even diminish a citizen's political capacity. Why?
2. Ultratargeting can drive other issues out of the electoral decision-making process. If abortion becomes a litmus test, then as a voter I'm not likely to care much about candidates' stands on the environment or Social Security or foreign aid to Israel.
3. And then, the electorate is fragmented in a potentially damaging way. Now, of course, there's nothing wrong inside a two-party country such as the United States with breaking the ideological hold on issues by those parties. But, once the parties' backs are broken—and every presidential election since 1988 has seen less than half of the actual voters registered as party members—then the question of political vision and coherence is raised more urgently. As David

Broncoccio of Public Radio International's Marketplace program has noted, "the Web's capacity to winnow down exposure to a limited range of stories can be dangerous to a population that needs common references" (paraphrased in Selnow 194). The potentially most serious damage of Internet politics is what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. a decade ago called "the disuniting of America." Can you run a country of soon 300 millions souls with a radically fragmented citizenry—people who can use the computer's hyperlinking capabilities to run away from centers of power, action, and coherent policy to more and more esoteric locations?

The digital revolution, therefore, is for now to be neither celebrated nor feared by the student of rhetorical democracy—only watched very, very carefully. With a view to civic engagement, the World Wide Web can amplify the vox populi even literally, thanks to all of the dot-gov sites to which you can address e-mail and to all of the political action sites that will speak to the hubs of power for you. It also breaks the straps of time and place that restrain the body politic. Political institutions check their e-mails, more or less, on a daily basis, no matter whether it's electing time or time for hearings, and of course citizens are no longer geographically limited in their contacts with like-minded others. New spaces for both political action and political identity are created, spaces with beautiful electronic landscapes, without the fences of cultural boundaries and the shackles of repressive governments (pace Morley and Robins).

#### So What's a Rhetorician to Do?

Before I conclude, I really should engage in direct address to this audience. What are we to make of a rhetorical democracy that's powered by Intel and shepherded by Microsoft, Inc.?

Now of course it's obvious that we should be looking at more than single speeches. Don't get me wrong: I love to analyze speeches, I still teach speeches from Kennedy to Bush in my contemporary political rhetoric class, and I even publish books and book chapters analyzing political speeches. My official University of Iowa title includes the phrase "Professor of Public Address," and in fact I profess "public address" in quite a traditional way.

But I also do more. I analyze filmed and video political materials, teach a seminar on 20<sup>th</sup>-century visual politics in the United States, and try to write rhetorically about the multimediated discourses—that is, discourses whose messages tend to develop not within but across the verbal, the visual, and the acoustic codes of film and television. Most of us were trained to shred a literate-verbal work. To be maximally useful to our students, to outfit them for the communication environment of our time, we'd better be training them to shred multimediated work with equal expertise, because nobody else is.

And this brings me to what I find as a special challenges of computer-mediated, especially hypertextual, communication. What ought we to be doing to Internet-based communication, especially political communication? We face some very special challenges here:

- First, many Web messages are both oral and literate in tone and form, sometimes chatty, at other times formal, and they can—but need not—rely upon visual technologies for controlling meaning-making by the way they're laid out. A political group such as the Women for Aryan Unity offers a series

of straightforward position papers on relevant topics; such a website is amenable to traditional rhetorical analysis. But an attack website from Campaign 2000 such as “Skeleton Closet—Al Gore, the Dark Side” needs an Adobe Acrobat Reader to access, and is complicated enough to let you select your preferred issues for skewering him: his wife, his stand on tobacco, his contributors, his votes on environmental issues, and of course everyone’s favorite—the claim that he invented the Internet. Varied sites require varied analytical schemata and semiotic interests.

- Weblogs—also called just plain blogs—are excellent sites of rhetorical-political research. Blogs have been around since 1997 ([Weblogs](#)). They’re individuals’ personalized collections of websites on a topic of interest to those people, often updated daily in diary form. By now, there are e-journals that enumerate them, and they even can be subscribed to. There are journalists with weblog beats (“News”). Blogs allow people to keep up with the latest web-based developments in areas of their interests, led by a favorite blogger. They are ripe for rhetorical analysis for the kinds of information winnowed in and winnowed out, the rhetorical persona of the blogger, and their ideological framing.
- Similarly, we must find ways as rhetoricians to study the political search processes in which individuals engage. Only then will we be able to understand the heart of the political messages coming to citizens.

That last point is particularly important for students of rhetoric, I think. Consider this: The hyperlinking function of computers allows its users—you and me and those mothers with kids under eighteen—to build their own messages. Herein lies a rhetorical enigma: the authors of those messages and the audiences of those messages are the same people. The rhetors and the auditors are one. How, then, are we to understand rhetorical process? Who is building what for whom? Who is persuading whom and why? Are there processes of identity formation and confirmation at work when people go trolling on the Internet, looking for political information that tells them they’re ok in how they think and act in the world? In other words, not only are the rhetoricians’ critical objects in the political arena changing, but so are the questions we should be asking. Civic engagement, I would argue, is as much a matter of understanding the building and maintenance of political identity, that is, questions about polity, as it is about getting legislation passed, that is, questions about policy. Nowhere is that more clear than in politically interested listservs and chat rooms, where citizens peddle their politics and form both individual and collective political identities.

#### Between Yesterday and Tomorrow

Toffler was right. We are living between yesterday and tomorrow, in the case of Americans, between what during yesterday was the world’s most expensive political machine—and I fear it will be that way even in 2003, when campaign reforms go into effect—and what tomorrow will be the world’s most advanced political communication system that people will continue to use more often and with more effect. The next, some call it postmodernist, political revolution is here. Yesterday’s pundits are racing to see if they can manage working in tomorrow’s inevitable political environment. And you are standing here, watching the show and trying to figure out whether it’s worth rethinking

some of your scholarly skills and apparatuses in order to capture that environment in interpretively and theoretically significant ways.

Civic engagement in a rhetorical democracy ultimately depends upon an empowered public comprised of flute makers, legitimatizers of political forms and policies, and rhetors willing to demand of their leaders all of the virtues that Cicero catalogued and all of the wise policy that Edmund Burke assumed legislators could formulate. And how a public does those things is what we as rhetoricians ought to be studying. To do that, Gerard Hauser (279) asserts, “To learn what a public thinks, we first must monitor the social conversation within a reticulate public sphere to ascertain who is speaking to whom about what . . . . Their rhetorical exchanges provide more than data; their narratives of common meaning, web of associations, and historicity each reveal the reference world of meaning they are coconstructing and provide the context for understanding their specific judgments.”

I could not better set your charge for tomorrow myself. So, thank you for coming and I wish you exciting and productive conversations about rhetorical democracy and civic engagement.

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#### Foonotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Levellers in the debate wanted the franchise distributed in all cities, counties, and boroughs according to the number of inhabitants in each, though not everyone living in an area would be defined as "inhabitant." Almost everyone in the debate started from the supposition that having an "interest"—in terms of an estate consisting of taxable property—was a demand of citizenship. The few who would deny that supposition were ignored.

<sup>2</sup> Another Pew Institute survey (Youth vote) points to a serious jump in political use of the Internet during presidential elections. Four percent of the public said it went online for political news during the 1996 campaign, with that percentage jumping to 18% in 2000. (Among regular online users, those numbers were 22% and 33% respectively.) For those going online for election news, 56% said the information is more convenient; 29%, too little news on other media; 12%, information not available elsewhere can be found on the 'Net; and 6%, they could find news reflecting their "personal interests."