

# Book Reviews

## Social Media Ethics and the Rhetorical Tradition

**Rhetoric, Technology, and the Virtues**, by Jared S. Colton and Steve Holmes. Utah State UP, 2018. 184 pp.

**Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies**, edited by Douglas M. Walls and Stephanie Vie. WAC Clearinghouse/UP of Colorado, 2017. 348 pp.

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At the Obama Foundation Summit in October 2019, former President Barack Obama questioned the efficacy of social media users who rely on Twitter and other popular forums to foster a “call-out” or “woke culture” that he assessed was often more judgmental and intolerant than activist (Rueb and Taylor). As a public rhetorician, Obama was encouraging the young people attending the summit to consider the affordances of online public discourse in fostering ethical behavior and more genuine forms of activism. However insightful and newsworthy, Obama’s assessment of much of today’s public discourse is not a new argument. Indeed, it reflects the wisdom of the classical rhetoricians themselves, from the older sophist Protagoras’s assertion that rhetoric could be used to make the worse case appear the better (Poster), to Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric for the ages, “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (*Rhetoric*).

Scholarship in digital rhetoric and composition is often theoretically and pedagogically focused on moving students and citizens from passive consumers of information to harnessing digital tools for their own personal and professional goals through civic action. We see this in both alphabetic and multi-modal form via hashtag activism, from #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter to #TakeaKnee, as well as visual rhetorical remixes across social media platforms. This includes not only hashtags but meme culture as well. Consider the case of Grumpy Cat, aka Tardar Sauce, the perennially frowning feline star of such popular memes as “I Don’t like Mondays” and “I Like the Sound You Make When You Shut Up” (Menendez). Just as President Obama’s commentary about call-out culture made international headlines, so too did Grumpy Cat’s death earlier in 2019. As her Wikipedia page reports, Grumpy Cat had a combined social media network following of over twelve million viewers.

Be it a former president of the United States, a feline internet celebrity, the tweets of our current President that drive the daily news cycle, or the rise

of internet influencers and vloggers marketing products and lifestyles, social media networks are multimodal and multigenred, multivocal and multilingual, and inherently rhetorical as they both persuade and entertain. Certainly, as Protagoras and Obama suggest, these online networks can make the worse case appear the better in ways that have led to questions about information ethics in an era of algorithmic rhetorical practices that attempt to influence the digital public and the digital electorate.

As a result of such diverse digital rhetorical artifacts that are produced, distributed, and consumed within and across equally diverse digital discourse communities, we are less focused on the question of *whether* to study today's social media networks as rhetorical composing but more attuned to applying an array of rhetorical and ethical frameworks, methods, and methodologies, within both academic and public contexts. Two recent, and I would argue necessary, books that ground the study of social media in the rhetorical tradition are Jared S. Colton and Steve Holmes's *Rhetoric, Technology, and the Virtues* and Douglas M. Walls's and Stephanie Vie's collection *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies*. Both books suffer the fate of print discussions of social media; the dynamic Twitterverse alone populates and circulates at a velocity for which the static nature of print scholarship can never catch up in terms of applying rhetorical theory to contemporary practice, including the 2016 election and its aftermath. Nevertheless, the powerful scope of these rhetorical and ethical discussions provides useful models to replicate in even the most current social media life and news cycle.

Central to Colton and Holmes's argument is the emphasis on Aristotelian virtue ethics as a neglected paradigm "grounded in the dispositions individuals develop through their daily living practices—practices in the present that increasingly involve social media and digital technologies" (5). In my own work, I have relied heavily on Stuart Selber's triumvirate of functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies stemming from his 2004 *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Yet, like many of my colleagues, I have always posited that the emphasis on ethics is an equally vital component, thus making Colton and Holmes's contribution to the scholarly conversation on digital rhetorics a compelling one. While the authors acknowledge that Aristotelian virtue ethics is not a singular framework to identify ethical affordances and challenges in digital rhetorical practices, they skillfully align this framework with contemporary theorists and philosophers that include Jacques Rancière, Adriana Cavarero, Martha Nussbaum, and Jane Bennett and situate their work in current digital rhetorical theory.

The book first articulates an operational definition of virtue ethics by juxtaposing Aristotelian concepts from *Nicomachean Ethics* with three specific frameworks: *utilitarianism*, the evaluation of behavior based on its greater good

for a vast majority, with its roots in the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; *deontology*, the assessment of actions based on their adherence to existing ethical or moral principles, à la Immanuel Kant; and *postmodernism*, a more fluid attention to cultural and ideological as opposed to universal conditions that drive the definition and evaluation of ethical behavior in both digital and non-digital contexts, relying on philosophers from Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault to rhetoricians such as James Berlin and James Porter. In many ways the postmodern most closely meshes with rhetoric, connected to the concept of *Kairos* and more sophisticated and democratic conceptions of knowledge-making through language. What differentiates these and other postmodern approaches, according to the authors, is a frequent rejection of ethical frameworks based on utilitarian and deontological value systems. In contrast, a virtue ethics framework is dependent on Aristotle's and the authors' subsequent emphasis on *hexis*, or the habits and dispositions impacting "decision making across multiple and contingent rhetorical situations" (12) and the emergence of these habits, both good and bad, in social media contexts.

Consequently, Colton and Holmes organize their resulting discussion around a series of diverse technological genres and modalities to document how virtue ethics offers rhetoric and composition scholars a better understanding of the digital habits of everyday users. I would agree that given our current digital moment, such a process is necessary from both a critical literacy standpoint, in terms of helping students and future citizens decipher human and algorithmic rhetorical practices, and from a rhetorical literacy standpoint, in terms of helping those same students and citizens develop habits that positively contribute to the communities in which they participate. In this way, *Rhetoric, Technology, and the Virtues* questions what it means to be ethically literate in the digital age. Colton and Holmes prove the power of a virtue ethics framework in its application to several specific genres: closed captioning through video production, digital sampling and remix, and "slacktivism."

Given recent discussions of accessibility and the prominence of disability studies in rhetoric and composition and computers and writing, the emphasis on closed captioning is significant. Here, the authors deploy Jacques Rancière's theory of active equality as a "hexis of social justice" to challenge closed captioning as both an ethical and, in some contexts, unethical practice. Thus, the authors challenge mere captioning for captioning's sake, with more focus on how the use of such captioning is part of the meaning- and knowledge-making process of digital rhetorical composing. A related concern is the ideological nature of that process, particularly in those instances where captions are used to reinforce cultural stereotypes. For the authors, Rancière's emphasis on equality aligns with intentional, rhetorically effective practices that benefit users. Within a *hexis of social justice* captioning is considered a foundational aspect

of the composing process rather than supplemental to it. Although Colton and Holmes provide several helpful strategies for how instructors could enact these goals in the classroom, some of these hypothetical examples could use more balance with actual pedagogical practices by the authors themselves or by teacher-scholars doing similar work in order to better acknowledge the limits and the admitted challenges of deploying such goals. Ultimately, both Rancière and Aristotle represent “a hexis that a digital rhetorician must constantly cultivate in order to practice active forms of social justice within workplace situations and research practices” (73).

The authors further advocate for a *hexis of care* in their next chapter on digital sampling. While discussions of remix and digital sampling have typically focused on copyright, intellectual property, and fair use (see, for example, Lawrence Lessig’s *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* or Martine Rife’s *Invention, Copyright, and Digital Writing*), Colton and Holmes apply Adriana Cavarero’s philosophies of vocal expression and vulnerability to define a hexis of care as addressing “the kinds of questions we should be asking in our own digital rhetoric pedagogies and practices that draw on sampling—questions that interrogate how other cultures, traditions, and people are represented and acknowledged” (80). The chapter includes many useful examples, notably from popular music, to articulate, via Cavarero and from what seems a lesser extent in this case Aristotle, a heuristic of vulnerability to assess the motives and consequences for digital sampling practices, whether they are in fact caring or, conversely, wounding. These questions are exceptionally useful in both theoretical and pedagogical contexts, and the authors synthesize various perspectives on sampling, from appropriating at will regardless of cultural origins, to advocating a more visible, respectful acknowledgment of the cultures and communities represented in such remixes.

The final two hexeis involve issues of *generosity* and *patience*. In their chapter on social media technology, Colton and Holmes connect Aristotle’s and Martha Nussbaum’s respective takes on generosity, the latter reflecting the ability to give, without expecting a return on investment, to slacktivism. Here, a virtue ethics approach questions the dispositions that may evolve from such online activities in both virtual and face-to-face contexts. The primary example driving the chapter is the “Humans of New York” website and its growth into a space for online philanthropy and social justice, successful in “creating a set of conditions in which the disposition of generosity can be cultivated in what many of us would consider to be a stereotypical slacktivist space” (96). Such models, whether it be the Ice Bucket Challenge also featured in the chapter, or even as I write this essay, the current worldwide response to the bushfires in Australia, may inevitably challenge the binary between the online and offline and the ways in which today’s hashtag activist culture has undoubtedly

fostered a hexis of generosity even if it is less visible in physical settings, a clear affordance of social media in circulating information, values, and ethics.

In their chapter on the hexis of patience, Colton and Holmes turn to environmental activist rhetorics, including the process of shaming individuals online for their lack of environmental responsibility in what the authors identify as a form of epideictic rhetoric. Consistent with other chapters, virtue ethics are combined with contemporary philosophy, in this case, Jane Bennett's new materialist frameworks that extend the notion of agency to both human and non-human actants, something the authors accurately note is a current focus in rhetorical studies. In reacting against outrage and anger, both Aristotle and Bennett foreshadow the concerns that former president Barack Obama raises about "woke" and "call-out culture," thus making the discussion, even with fewer timely examples, a highly relevant one for today's digital age. Colton and Holmes conclude the book by advocating for a hexis based in part on Bruno Latour's "virtue of fairness," which not only disrupts the binary between human and machine but examines "how networks and actors support behaviors as opposed to previously settled topoi alone" (143). This point reinforces Aristotelian virtue ethics and complementary rhetorics and philosophies as dynamic and responsive to the online spaces that shape them, undoubtedly a viable analytical framework.

Because I identify prominently as a Computers and Writing specialist and have participated in that discourse community for several decades, I can't help but sense an occasional disjointedness between theory and application in the text. Some additional inclusion of work that more specifically addresses issues of accessibility, digital activism/slacktivism would help to create a more recursive relationship between theory and practice as well as broaden the audience scope for this important discussion, notably because Colton and Holmes identify their audiences to be both novice and expert, and both researcher and practitioner. They denote their intended audience as "digital rhetoricians," which is appropriate given their topic and their reliance on Doug Eyman's definition of digital rhetoric as "the application of rhetorical theory (as an analytic method or heuristic for production) to digital texts and performances" (qtd. 6). Yet the sub-discipline of Computers and Writing seems oddly peripheral; despite some citations from this area, it is seemingly absent from the authors' early delineation of the field in their introduction. Because the book's purpose is also to orient newcomers, this is a minor concern in what is a solidly recursive relationship between social media practices and both rhetorical and ethical traditions.

For this reason, another recent book, *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies*, is a notable complement in extending academic and popular contexts where ethical and rhetorical composing can and do flourish.

ish. Both books stress the rhetoricity of social media, and in their introduction, Douglas M. Walls and Stephanie Vie remind us of how Barack Obama had been dubbed the first “social media President,” something that the era of Donald Trump as the current tweeter-in-chief makes clear the ubiquitous and forever present role these tools play in our personal, public, and civic lives. Through their skillful assemblage of sixteen chapters across three sections, “Publics and Audiences”; “Presentations of Self, Groups, and Data”; and “Pedagogy,” the editors and contributors confirm that social media rhetorics flourish within writing classrooms and our resulting digital writing research methods and methodologies. Again, these are not new areas, but as Heidi A. McKee and Dánielle Nicole DeVoss’s 2007 collection, *Digital Writing Research: Technologies, Methodologies, and Ethical Issues*, questioned, “How are computerized technologies, particularly global technologies, raising new . . . ethical issues related to privacy, individual rights, and representation? . . . Given the continually evolving state of technology and human interactions with and through technological affordances, what preparation do future researchers need?” (4). Despite the decade’s difference between these two collections’ publication, these questions remain central and, in the case of Walls and Vie’s compilation, are addressed by a current group of social media writing researchers working in even more diverse academic, public, and communal contexts than perhaps we may have imagined over a decade ago, when Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were in their respective infancy and toddler stages, and Instagram was not yet conceived.

Part One, “Publics and Audiences,” provides a broad swath of social media’s impact on activism, critical literacies, and community building, and the ways various rhetorical exigencies build and sustain virtual forums. In ways that align with Colton and Holmes, there is implicit attention in a number of chapters to the ethical dimensions. For example, Caroline Dadas’s lead chapter “Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk of ‘Attention,’” offers users strategies for engaging in such digital advocacy that not only deploy the affordances of Twitter and other platforms but also help activists understand cultural, historical, and political contexts, the role of “rhetorical velocity” and circulation, and the need to align their work with reputable coverage of the issues at hand. Dadas’s case study includes #bringbackourgirls and #yesallwomen to document the ways hashtags can be decontextualized, repurposed, and remixed for differing ideological purposes and thus encourages further attention to the consequences of these and other activist campaigns. Chapters such as Estee Beck’s encourage us to consider the ethics of online sharing and prosumerism in an age of algorithmic surveillance and promotes “learning how to identify, analyze, and possibly subvert structures of power and enable critical consciousness” (50) in both classroom and community spaces. Although there is an explicit and not inaccurate assumption throughout the book that social media participation is

endemic to our culture, Cory Bullinger and Stephanie Vie's "After a Decade of Social Media: Abstainers and Ex-Users" provides an important counterpoint, advocating research on those who have opted out and questioning how such non-users are defined by others or depicted in the larger culture, how they define themselves, and how they articulate their motivations for not engaging online. Whether it be due to privacy and safety concerns (something of great import given Beck's earlier chapter), time constraints in light of managing an online presence, or simply as a form of dissent from the ubiquity of digital platforms, non-users are as vital a population to foreground in social media research as their connected counterparts.

Part Two, "Presentation of Self, Groups, and Data," relies on a range of mixed-methods studies to interrogate the participation and identity choices users make, including students. Bronwyn T. Williams's chapter on polymedia device usage among students reflects decisions about how they choose to maintain relationships and the role of emotion in those choices. Whether it's a student maintaining telephone contact with a parent because of the parent's comfort-level with the medium, or participating in forums because of a sense of belonging with other friends in that particular space, Williams rightly concludes that given "the role of mobile digital technologies in creating and nurturing relations, we should see it not as replacement, nor an add-on, but as an integral part of daily life" (141). Personal and community interaction is also critical to Amber Buck's "Grad School 2.0: Performing Professionalism on Social Media," as she details her case study of three graduate students and their ten-month social networking activities, including connecting with scholars in areas of interest and expertise, live tweeting conferences, and representing personal and professional identities in online forums. Buck's chapter has important implications for mentoring graduate students at a crucial point in their professional careers as their continued navigation of expectations—both online and off—impact the role of social media in that identity formation. Other chapters in the section foreground the important role of cultural rhetorics and identities to promote accessibility, empowerment, and social justice. As Les Hutchinson concludes in her chapter relating to anonymity, "Not every Twitter user has the same privilege to participate in online conversations freely without consequences. Most of us do have to account for our social positions, genders, politics, even our sexualities when we speak online" (201). Hutchinson profiles her own efforts to subvert and reject traditional performances of gender to develop a queered feminist identity and the possibilities and constraints of anonymity in that process. But even access to supportive forums does not guarantee activism, engagement, and empowerment. This is something Kristin L. Arola has observed firsthand, as she reports in her chapter, "Indigenous

Interfaces,” contending that such networks can exist and be deployed even in concert with other facets of our identities, even in forums like Facebook.

Space constraints do not allow me to include every chapter in my overview of this collection’s many strengths, including the final section, “Pedagogy.” Lillian W. Mina’s “Social Media in the Writing Class: The New Digital Divide” reports the results of a survey of instructors to determine their use of social media in the writing classroom, with the dominant rationale including helping students understand rhetorical choices, analyzing online content, developing critical and reflective thinking, and improving overall writing skills. Similarly, Michael J. Faris’s chapter, “Contextualizing Students’ Media Ideologies and Practices,” collects diverse data to focus in this case on student perceptions of their use of these tools in the classroom, including how they interacted with teachers and with each other. Faris provides a useful heuristic to help teachers ground their social media pedagogies in institutional contexts and ideologies in ways that benefit students. Finally, Chris M. Anson’s concluding chapter to the collection, “Intellectual, Argumentative, and Informational Affordances of Public Forums: Potential Contributions to Academic Learning,” reminds us of the collection’s goals, our responsibility to bridge the gap between academic and self-sponsored literacies, and our commitment to continued research that strengthens our own and our students’ knowledge about the rhetorical affordances of digital and multimodal texts and contexts.

I am completing this review essay while watching an episode of MSNBC’s *MTP Daily*, where anchor Chuck Todd’s feature “I’m Obsessed With” focuses on the hashtag #bigiftrue, noting that although Twitter users are not expected to be fact checkers, citizens should take responsibility for their retweets. After a series of parody #bigiftrue examples, Todd states that “If you think #bigiftrue absolves you of social media sin, well that’s wrong. Before you Tweet, think.” In an era of fake news, social bots, and algorithmic rhetorics that influence our consumer habits and our decision making, including Cambridge Analytica’s psychographical and inherently unethical practices that so influenced the 2016 Presidential election, the question of social media’s rhetorical affordances is a compelling one.

One lingering concern, despite the useful discussions of access and social justice that aligns both books, is a lesser emphasis on more global networks. For example, while it has been important to see the impact of Tarana Burke’s original activism and creation of the Me Too movement on behalf of sexual assault survivors that is now part of the #MeToo hashtag origin story (when initially it wasn’t), not everyone has access to the tools and the freedoms to engage in such online solidarity. The #MeToo movement has looked different in China, for example, where instead of overt references to #MeToo, the emojis and words for “rice” and “bunny” replace the powerful hashtag (Anderson),

given that the words for “rice bunny” in Chinese are “mi too,” a subversive way to express solidarity and resist censorship.

Overall, the authors and editors of these two books have provided analytical frameworks, mixed-method research studies, and powerful calls to action for their audiences to take social media seriously, lest we do find the worse case to be made the better. As Chuck Todd aptly concludes his segment, if we heed these calls, “Twitter would be a better, happier place. And if that were true, that would be big.” This call applies to all online rhetorical spaces, and the power of both *Rhetoric, Technology, and the Virtues* and *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies* is that these nascent 21st-century communication spaces are not supplemental to the classical rhetorical traditions of Protagoras, Aristotle, their respective contemporaries, and those who came after them. They are, in fact, a vital continuation and representation of rhetoric and writing as inherently powerful in impacting local and global audiences, and the resulting need to consider the ethical demands and consequences of that power.

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