

Restrictions and Allowances of Rhetorical Power Within Digital Genre Platforms

Central to any rhetorical situation is a consideration of the setting within which a rhetorical exigence is being addressed and it is prudent to look at this setting as a combination of allowances and restrictions imposed upon rhetors largely by their medium of address. That restrictions are ever-present in rhetorical situations has significant scholarship to support it, some of which I mention in this work, so I will not aim to make that case here but rather to build upon it and explore how restrictions apply to digital spaces and how, by viewing digital platforms as genres, we can use a rhetorician's vocabulary to better understand how users' rhetorical power is enabled and restricted by digital spaces, how this encourages their frequent switching between multiple platforms in order to engage with audiences in multiple ways and maximize their rhetorical power, and how this switching behavior affects users. Wielding an understanding of digital platforms and environments such as social applications, educational applications, websites, and online forums as genres that communicate in specific, defined ways, as I will explain is reasonable and indeed important, will also yield insight into the ways in which users engage in genre transfer when switching between digital spaces. I will explore the aspects that are universal to digital platforms by focusing primarily on Twitter, but will also make mention of a few other digital platforms such as Facebook, blogs, and wikis, which are specified by Moore et al.'s study on "student technology use when writing", using those students' behavior as indicative of the behavior of users aged 18-23 years old (Moore et al.). I will also make mention of social media applications such as Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr, for they surely belong in any discussion of modern digital platforms due to their ubiquity. The range of digital genres represented by this group will provide a landscape within which to explore the ways that operating within and amongst digital genres affects users. Finally, as an extension of this

exploration I will explore how and why users make additions to this landscape by creating their own platforms. There is a very low barrier to entry for creation in digital environments and no discussion of rhetorical power would be complete without exploring the options that users have when they feel their power is being restricted. This final portion will centralize algorithmic restrictions the likes of which are common online and the rhetorical power that is exercised by inventing new websites, using 350.org and Parler as examples. The ability to create customizable genres with ease is unique to digital media and will not be fully detailed here, but it will be introduced as it is one way that users exercise rhetorical power.

I will employ the term “user” at many points in this paper and with the term I aim to invoke an image of anyone who uses any of the popular platforms mentioned on at least a daily basis. “Rhetorical power”, as it used above and henceforth, refers to a user’s ability and freedom to effectively convey information by any means they choose to the audience of their choice. Being able to use any platform to disseminate any information, in any way, to any audience would be an example of a maximization of rhetorical power. A restriction of this power is what we find when one’s ability to communicate is arrested, one wants to communicate information in ways which they do not have a platform for, or one’s communications are not able to reach their intended audience. If one wishes to address the nation on all the national news networks, for example, and they, like most of us, do not have the ability to conjure such a situation, this would be a limit on that individual’s rhetorical power, as defined by their limited ability to express themselves how they want to who they want. This understanding is key to my argument because, as I will show, digital spaces are all limited in their audiences, their rhetorical tools, and in the way that their algorithms organize and prioritize content. Content restrictions (specific combinations of text, image, article, video, and sound content), size restrictions (character limit,

video length limit, media size, platform availability i.e. iPhone/Android/Mac/PC), and viewability options in fact define them. It follows that we must consider them as genres in part because of a recognition of their formal aspects and in part because of their boundaries. This is so we can understand how they are used, switched between, and created. It need be noted also that these platforms are often altering, and an understanding of them as genres that users often switch between allows one to best understand these iterative changes.

Sample Cases and Their Viability

Conversations in this paper will focus somewhat on smaller, custom platforms, but mostly on larger, more defined platforms with which everyday internet and smartphone users are well acquainted or at the very least aware. Both categories do not at all constitute an exhaustive study of every digital platform, as a study of every platform would be nearly impossible considering the rate at which creation and innovation find footholds in digital environments. The examples I employ are intended to act as sample cases through which one can gain an understanding of the ways *any* digital platform can affect users, not simply the ways the ones that these in question do. I will focus largely on Twitter but mean for the conclusions drawn about it to be sample cases that can be understood as universal and applicable to other websites and applications. For example, in a discussion of character-limit restrictions it is important to note that Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and others have limits and are somewhat defined by them, but it is not critical to know what these limits are.

The aforementioned smaller group will consist of 350.org, an environmental website mentioned by Adrienne Russell in her work, “Journalism as Activism: Recoding Media Power”

wherein she discusses limitations of common platforms and new ones that are created to fulfill specific desires to exercise certain types of rhetorical power, and by my own exploration of Parler, a digital platform common amongst American conservatives who fear or have allegedly experienced “deplatforming” in other environments. The larger group, the one this paper spends most of its time on, is defined by Moore et. al, who in the paper “Revisualizing Composition: How First-Year Writers Use Composing Technologies” shows that certain platforms, namely Twitter, Facebook, Wikis, blogs, and email clients, among others are frequently utilized by first-year composition students. They write, “Students regularly use a range of technologies when composing, but they—not surprisingly—use them for different purposes...students reported using cell phones, Facebook, notebook or paper, pencil, word-processing programs, e-mail, and Twitter to compose the genre they wrote most often” (Moore et Al. 5). I will examine common elements that allow an understanding of these platforms to operate as genres in order to include other social media sites such as Instagram, Tumblr, and LinkedIn into this paper’s exploration of rhetorical power.

Digital Platform as Digital Genre

It is far too often the case that digital platforms and tools are thought simply to be routers for the same type of communication that, in a more convenient setting, would be conducted orally and in-person. As is the case with writing in general, the use of digital platforms is not merely a way of transferring thoughts or verbal units of communication from one place to another as if they existed objectively apart from their medium. Rather, they are tools that translate and form the way we communicate by way of the constrictions and expectations of their

given mediums. Also much like writing, just as we recognize written genres as being defined by both their intentions and their structure, we can define digital genres by the same criteria.

Scholar Amy J. Devitt writes that “Part of what all readers and writers recognize when they recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the discourses are about”(Devitt 12). When engaging with a mystery novel, for example, readers not only classify the text as such and expect that within it there are unknown aspects that the reader is supposed to want to know (i.e. who did it? Where are they? Where is this or the other piece of evidence? etc.), but also make assumptions about the ways the characters will act (i.e. that they will try to discover more about the unknown thing). Comparing this control case of mystery novels to tweets on Twitter, we can see that they both contain elements of expectation, providing a strong argument that we may consider tweets as a genre. When scrolling through tweets, one goes in expecting that they will see and interact with units of online communication which people have the ability to like, retweet, and comment on. As is the case with mysteries, the content present can be about myriad different things and have many different settings or topics, but one knows generally what to expect of that content and can thus put it into a genre. Devitt writes that, “The classificatory nature of genre is an essential part of understanding genre and its significance, but such classification is defined rhetorically rather than critically, by the people who use it, for their purposes of operating in the everyday world”(Devitt 9). A rhetorical understanding guides an argument of tweets as a genre, exemplified by the way that, when someone says, “Look at this tweet,” ones expectations are already somewhat formed, in much the same way they are formed if someone were to say, “Hey, why don’t you give this mystery novel a read.”

Genres are also recognizable in their formal aspects, though it is important to recognize, as Devitt states, that “The rhetorical and linguistic scholarship argues that formal features physically mark some genres, act as traces, and hence may be quite revealing. But these formal traces do not *define* or *constitute* the genre”(Devitt 11). Concerning our example case we can safely say that the mystery novel is formed by any permutation of words, pictures, drawings, or diagrams, all of which serve to formally compose a story with an unknown element. To Devitt’s point, a story that leaves something unknown and is composed of these elements is not *necessarily* a mystery novel, because those formal elements do not define it, but each mystery novel will contain these elements.

Employing this understanding to an observation of tweets, what do we find? Twitter’s help center explains that (as of this writing) a tweet may contain up to 280 characters and include 4 photos, one GIF image, or one video (Twitter). These are the formal requirements that constitute a tweet and although any permutations of these elements does not *necessarily* constitute a tweet (one can put text and images in a Word document), these are the restrictions on Twitter’s units of communications. Twitter’s platform that consists of a stream of these units and ways to “like” and respond to them constitutes a recognizable genre because of its user’s expectations and this unique form and delivery. Because of the flexibility of written words, tweets can then form sub-genres in the same way any other text can (i.e. joke tweets, political tweets), but that is beyond the scope of this paper. What is key is that due to their restricted rhetorical allowances and the expectations one associates with scrolling through tweets on Twitter, the platform has invented a genre all its own.

This example defines a tweet on Twitter as a genre in order that we may see other sites and modes of communication in the same way. Likewise, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and

others each contain a unique combination of expectations and formal boundaries that allow us to understand them as genres all their own. From here on out I will refer to these and other digital platforms rhetorically, as I have shown is appropriate, and I will refer to all of these unique digital genres with the umbrella term “digital platforms” or “digital environments.” These terms serve to distinguish internet-connected, public platforms from private, static, offline technologies such as pen and paper, typewriters, and Microsoft Word, which do not qualify as environments or genres, but rather as tools, and which I will refer to as “traditional tools” and “traditional platforms” in this paper.

Habit Formation

It need be noted before any substantive discussion of digital platforms can take place the extent to which they are understood to be habit-forming and fiscally focused, as these are factors that alter the way they are used and thus how users are affected by them. In the explorations to come, I write with the understanding that they are habit-forming, an understanding supported by scholarship on Internet Addiction Disorder by Kimberly S. Young who writes, “Of all the diagnoses referenced in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*(DSM-IV) pathological gambling was viewed as most akin to this phenomenon”(Young), as well as by an understanding of the fundamental business models of internet companies, as provided by Karl Hodge, who writes, “Senator Orrin Hatch asks, quite innocently, if you’re providing a service, how can you do that for free? The answer is, Facebook is not just in the business of providing you with a service. It is also in the business of farming your data” (Hodge). Additionally, Twitter’s own SEC filings, as reported by investor and author George McFarlane who states that “The company’s forward looking statements concern: *‘Our ability to attract advertisers to our*

platform and increase the amount that advertisers spend with us’ and ‘Our ability to improve user monetization, including advertising revenue per timeline view’”(McFarlane), concluding that “Twitter’s status as a place to find instant, unfiltered, democratized updates on everything from celebrity arrests to international civil unrest might make it important to the modern exchange of ideas, but again, that’s secondary to keeping the advertisers happy”(McFarlane).

While I do not aim to suggest that this is always the case, I believe that the scholarship supports an understanding that the internet-connected digital platforms of this discussion affect users differently than traditional platforms and that the companies who most often develop and maintain them are at least somewhat, if not mostly concerned with keeping users online so as to continue earning profit. This will undergird many of the coming discussions of rhetorical power.

Rhetorical Allowance

As restrictions are part and parcel of the digital platform genres in question, it bears examining how these restrictions are different than those present when using traditional tools for rhetorical communication. The difference, primarily, is that when communicating with the latter, one does have restrictions, but they are not near as prominent or defining. A word processor will let one keep creating virtually forever, instituting no limit upon how much text or how many videos or images are included, one can easily find new notebooks to write on if they run out of space for their writing or drawing, and one can speak for as long as they please, wherever they go. Furthermore, the expectations from these platforms are less clear, as their more open-ended rhetorical allowances provide the opportunity to produce ever more and ever more varied content. Through this lens we can understand the extent to which freedoms are bottled up in digital spaces. A 280 character tweet or a series of 10 photos with a caption feels very restrictive

compared to the unending scroll of a blank Microsoft Word document. It is important to note, though, that restrictions also create opportunity and so the term “restrictive” need not be understood as solely pejorative. Just as marking off an open field with out-of-bounds lines and goal markers and instituting a set of rules no doubt restricts players but also allows them the opportunity to play soccer, so too does limiting one’s means of rhetorical address, as digital platforms do, provide users the opportunity to practice rhetoric in specific ways, thus potentially increasing their rhetorical power.

This is all to say that, counterintuitively, platform restrictions in part enable users to engage in rhetoric the likes of which they would otherwise not, and which it can be argued would rarely be seen in traditional, more open-ended platforms which allow for virtually limitless creation. A good example is that of the Petrarchan sonnet, which requires a creator to adhere to a set of rules that may seem restrictive but that enable the creation of beautiful, laudable works of writing *because* of those imposed restrictions. Stanford professor Bob Sutton writes that “Research on creativity and constraint demonstrates that, when options are limited, people generate more, rather than less, varied solutions — apparently because their attention is less scattered” (Sutton). What I argue here is that a post on a digital platform is not exempt from this phenomena and that the varied content created in digital environments actually gets created with more frequency because of platform’s ubiquity, ease of use, and habit-forming tendencies. It could be the case that an individual participates in exchanges best using photographs or edited images and they find a freedom to share their work on an image-centric platform such as Instagram because of its tools and genre expectations, whereas before they had no accessible way to communicate like this. Or one could decide that Twitter provides an ideal set of multimodal tools through which they can best express themselves and so they utilize the Twitter

application or website to do so. I can personally note that I did not take near as many pictures or provide near as much commentary about my community as I did prior to my introduction to Instagram and Twitter, and that I also feel more motivated to take better photographs and provide better information because I am constantly influenced and inspired by the work of friends and strangers that is easily accessible to me through these platforms. The point is that no matter what the restrictions are, each digital platform creates with its restrictions a space within which one is able to practice a different kind of rhetoric than would be practiced elsewhere, and because of their accessibility, they also encourage users to produce a larger quantity of rhetorical material than they otherwise would. Users produce, engage, practice, and participate uniquely in these spaces, and while gaining rhetorical power by way of restriction may sound oxymoronic, I argue instead that restriction can be very much the arbiter of rhetorical power.

In Jason Palmeri's work, "The First Time Print Died," the author discusses the work of Harvey S. Wiener, a man who "offers a compelling discussion of ways to integrate multimedia composing (photo essays, collages, tape recording) into a traditional 'modes of discourse' curriculum"(Palmeri 94). He goes on to write of Harvey Wiener, explaining how he "...argues that media compositions such as the visual collage 'can involve the student in an unthreatening medium which gives him the chance to express his thinking without fear of penalty...it helps reduce self-consciousness and allows the growth of an element of creative expression that is often lost in the student's panic for correctness.'" Palmeri explains, "In this way, Wiener productively suggests that media compositions (collages, photo essays, tape-recorded interviews) can be a kind of bridge to print literacy for students who had had negative experiences composing with alphabetic text in the past"(Palmeri 96). This hypothetical situation of Wiener's, which concerns students adopting some now-outdated forms of media, is not at all far from a

discussion of modern digital platforms and their everyday users. One may easily consider a tweet, Instagram post, or Facebook or LinkedIn post as a multimedia composition that acts productively in the same way as Wiener's multimodal examples from the past and one certainly need not restrict these rhetorical practices to students. As specialized, low-stakes environments, these ubiquitous digital environments provide people with a way to practice very specific forms of creativity.

Further, even in cases where users have previously participated in photography or short-form content creation, for example, what digital platforms do is provide an environment to disseminate that content, thus increasing rhetorical power by increasing the number of people who will see it. While many would not label themselves Writers with a capital "W" and therefore not be submitting their work to literary magazine, they can perhaps hone their short-form rhetorical skills in a tweet and have ways to get feedback and start conversations there; while many would not consider themselves photographers worthy of their own museum exhibition, they may still take and share pictures and engage with others about their work on Instagram. One need not rent out gallery space, write a novel, or individually email out their work to reach others in these digital environments. Rather, one is provided a space to practice their preferred rhetorical skills and disseminate their work, constituting an increase in their rhetorical power compared to a situation wherein one uses a traditional platform that does not allow for this kind of action.

The specific combination of very restrictive rules that yield certain kinds of work and certain expectations no doubt provides users the opportunity to practice separate and specific rhetorical skills, and these practice spaces thus have serious benefits which serve to expand user's ability to transfer their knowledge to other contexts as a result of their continued practice

and immersion in their rhetorical genre. To relate back to the previous example, the user who finds a place on Twitter to write is not just freed because they have found a platform for their content and so practice more and reach more people. They may also benefit from the way their new knowledge can be transferred to other platforms. This of course depends on the individual but it is not difficult to imagine one's ability to write a standup routine being enhanced by their continually practicing by writing short jokes on twitter, for example. The genres are similar, but not identical, and information may be transferred between them.

Angela Rounsaville writes of Bawarshi's focus on the individual's memory in uptake, stating, "Bawarshi, who has written extensively about uptake, stresses the critical role of memory then defining uptake as 'the ideological interstices that configure, normalize, activate relations and meaning within and between systems of genres, [and which are] *learned recognitions of significance* that over time and in particular contexts become habitual' (653 emphasis added). In other words, prior experience and prior habit come to inform, as complex memories compelled by current exigence, the 'knowledge of what to take up, how, and when'" (Rounsaville). The genres of digital platforms fit this description well, as they are very much specific contexts that are habitually used. Utilizing Bawarshi's understanding of genre then, it can be concluded that if a user is constantly reading and writing jokes on Twitter, the skills they gain there can readily be applied in other comic settings. Rounsaville's commentary is again applicable when she writes, "...past experiences serve as platforms and interpretive frames for solving the problem of new and unfamiliar genres" (Rounsaville 35) providing further support for an argument that the specific work done in digital genre spaces can allow one a wealth of experience on which to pull from when engaging with new genres. In much the same way that practicing a sport is done by drilling specific smaller skills in order to improve one's overall ability in the hectic disorder of

actual competition, digital platforms provide their users with an opportunity to practice specific rhetorical skills deliberately, which may help them develop their overall rhetorical abilities when applied to essays, emails, speeches, or other means of communication.

That prior genre knowledge benefits users when they engage in transfer and uptake is not a novel concept, but it is important to note just how applicable these terms are to a discussion of digital platforms. When discussed as genres, one can think of time spent on them as time spent within a specialized, habitual practice space. Users find freedom to create and engage with content in new ways, and these new ways have the potential to provide skills that can be transferred elsewhere, both of which are reasons to believe that Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and others can increase the rhetorical power of their users.

Rhetorical Restriction

That platform restrictions yield restrictions of rhetorical power feels somewhat intuitive, but the subject is worthy of exploration if for no other reason than to understand the types of restrictions imposed and the extent to which a dearth of communicative freedom can impact user's overall rhetorical ability, motivation, and power. My exploration of this phenomena will centralize discussions of transfer and uptake as they are not just critical parts of any argument pertaining to genre but are features which are particularly impacted by genres that are digital. I previously argued that digital platforms can in fact enhance and encourage transfer and uptake and this is still true. What I acknowledge here is that that is not always the case. I do so by exploring cases where users are unable to recognize new genres because of their habitual use of restrictive platforms, as well as cases where users' transferal abilities are limited because of the

wide landscape of platforms available. Should a user want to express themselves using a new genre, they have the ability to find which a set of tools which lends itself best to their preferred means of communication, preventing them from even needing to engage in transfer in the first place. Habit-forming aspects of digital platforms will also come into play here, as it cannot be ignored that users will be accustomed to restrictions when they consistently operate within spaces that draw boundaries and constantly try to keep users within them, and becoming accustomed to limitations can have effects on a users' rhetorical ability.

I will first make the case that digital platforms can restrict the transferal abilities of their users by inhibiting them, as further arguments build upon this understanding. Angela Rounsaville provides an example of this when she writes about a student named John who is asked to complete a fairly typical first year composition assignment. Because of his limited prior experience, she writes that, "...the expectations of this assignment...[don't] appear to John to be a genre at all" (Rounsaville) before writing that, "From the perspective of high-road transfer as application, John's prior knowledge seems to hinder his entrance into this new writing situation. Regardless of the possible 'mutt genre' status of this writing assignment, John's prior genre knowledge is a constraint" (Rounsaville). John's is a situation that exemplifies negative transfer, a concept defined by the American Psychological Association as, "A process in which previous learning obstructs or interferes with present learning" (APA). This term is important because it defies assumptions that knowing more is always better, no matter the genre, and is apropos for this discussion because it can easily be the case that consistent engagement with restrictive digital platforms can have the same effect.

Say, for example, that a user spends a lot of time offering short-form political commentary on Twitter. This person tweets a lot of political articles, comments, memes, jokes,

facts, and insults, tweets the likes of which are absolutely everywhere on Twitter. This content reaches other people, they engage with it, and the user is then encouraged to produce more of such content because, whether people or disagree with them, they are getting attention. Twitter shows this user's content to more people because it generates controversy and drives more users to their site to see their advertisements, giving this user a sense of importance, and a cycle is created. I take issue with this situation specifically because if this user is ever in a place to produce a paper, or be on a podcast, or give a long speech, they may not even recognize these genres, as John did not recognize the genre of his assignment in Rounsaville's example. The user can become so accustomed to the tweet genre that their paper or their talk is just a regurgitation of short form, edgy political points that do not at all translate to the new genre. The user has been restricted by the formal aspects of the platform and by the actions of the platform itself which encouraged its continued use. The user is now unable to recognize other genres because they have been locked away, so to speak, in the walled garden that Twitter has created and actively controls. This is all to say that digital platforms are specialized genres that provide very limited freedom to their creators and that the habit-forming aspect of digital platforms can make habitual genre practice a liability. Because screen time is the variable that digital platforms wish to maximize, users can become accustomed to diluting their messages into required formats, making new genres not just foreign but incomprehensible.

A further aspect of a user's potential unpreparedness in the face of new genres and rhetorical situations concerns the genre *switching* that takes the place of genre *transfer* when engaging with the many platforms that are out there. As discussed before, common digital platforms are low-stakes and limited in their rhetorical tools, and it also need to be noted how numerous these platforms are ("75+ Social Media Sites You Need to Know in 2021," *Influencer*

Marketing Hub). Due to this wealth of choices, all of which want more users spending more time on them so as to increase profits, users are in a situation wherein they have the ability to find a platform that best suits their preferred set of communicational skills should they want to express themselves using a new genre. One need not do the work of describing something on Twitter when they can just find a picture and post it on Instagram, for example. I argue that this can be dangerous and inhibit transfer because there is simply no need for there to *be* a transfer of knowledge. With so many options so accessible, one is never in a place to employ skills they gained elsewhere, they are instead encouraged to find where they are comfortable in their ability to express what they feel. This practice does not necessarily involve transferring any knowledge or ability, but instead it prioritizes safety, thus inhibiting engagement with other rhetorical situations by conditioning users to think they can simply switch genres if they feel they can more capably accomplish a task in a different way. Because this is seldom the case in impactful rhetorical situations (one cannot decide that their office memo be delivered in song), a user's rhetorical ability is therefore understood to be arrested and with their lack of ability derived from a lack of transfer comes a lack of power because they can no longer capably represent themselves and their thoughts in environments other than those to which they have become accustomed.

The inhibiting behavior of digital platforms comes in part from their formal restrictions and in part from their encouraged use, those aspects which seek to drive users to them and that aim to keep them there. Both inhibit users from fully exercising their rhetorical power. To this point it is has been discussed what restrictions can do for and to users of digital platforms, both for better and for worse, but to fully explore how digital platforms affect users, one also needs to consider the case where users flee from established platforms entirely, as the reasons they do so

involve uniquely digital problems that impact rhetorical power and have beget a new wave of modern, digital solutions that enhance it significantly.

Digital Algorithms and Digital Creation

A key component of digital platforms that has not yet been discussed and which separates them entirely from traditional platforms is the algorithm. This section asks the questions, what happens when one cannot effectively connect to people with their rhetoric on an established platform? Why is that? And what if one cannot find a platform for the kind of content they want to create? Primarily, these are issues of reach, a metric that Hootsuite defines as “the total number of people who have seen your ad or content” (Zarzycki). In the former cases, reach is heavily influenced by an algorithm, and in the latter it is diminished by lack of opportunity. All of these cases, though, have the same solution: create a new digital platform.

In her book *Journalism as Activism: Recoding Media Power*, Adrienne Russell discusses digital media’s relationship to activism, a topic of discussion that has difficulty finding footholds in online spaces, as I will explain. She first notes that, “The most widely used tools among activists are Facebook, YouTube and Twitter” (Russell 79) establishing the specific platforms in question, before writing that,

“It is, of course, not only the design of software that embodies particular values but also the larger platforms and infrastructures through which we navigate online information. A small but growing group of ‘stacktivists’ are attempting to make infrastructure more visible and to critically address our relationship to it. The term ‘stacktivism’ references the computer science term ‘stacks,’ an abstract data type

that serves as a collection of elements that allows for the interconnection of technologies that form the infrastructures that shape our digital lives. Perhaps the most influential and yet mainly invisible tools in the stack are the algorithms that select information considered most relevant to us, which thus play a crucial role in our participation in public life. Algorithms are communication technologies, created in the interest of for-profit corporations, shaping worldviews and influencing emotions, commercial habits, and relationships” (Russell 77).

Russell is explaining that there are algorithms which acts as content filters whose inner workings are unknown and which determine how broadly user content will be disseminated and even how it is displayed. This is a clear restriction of rhetorical power. In one example on Twitter, users experimented with images to expose the racism of Twitter’s algorithm by posting various pictures which feature the same faces arranged differently, then seeing which ones Twitter’s facial recognition algorithm would select for the image’s thumbnail, which is of a smaller size. Here we see Kelly Loeffler featured twice

(<https://twitter.com/artordillos/status/1335773425701330944>):



When the two pictures posted are these:





Why did Twitter’s algorithm prioritize Kelly Loeffler’s face over that of Raphael Warnock, no matter their arrangement? And what reason do we have to believe that it will not further prioritize her messages over his? Clearly his image is being suppressed by the algorithm, so it is probable that his content is too; a clear example of a restriction of rhetorical power. This example is to show that the reach of content on digital platforms is restricted in ways that users are not allowed to understand. Limiting one’s reach directly limits one’s rhetorical power. A further and more serious example of how content is haphazardly promoted can be found which concerns YouTube, about which Matt Walston has “posted a YouTube video demonstrating how the platform’s recommendation algorithm pushes users into what he dubs a pedophilia ‘wormhole,’ accusing the company of facilitating and monetizing the sexual exploitation of children” (Lomas). Users have absolutely no idea what kind of content is being promoted on these sites and it is therefore reasonable to believe that certain types of content are over- or under-represented because of their algorithms. In Russell’s book, she quotes game designer Ian Bogost who notes,

“It is vital that we understand how the algorithms that dominate our experience operate upon us. Yet commercial companies – a recent phenomenon – now

systematically manage our image of algorithms and the information we receive about them” (Russel 77)

She also quotes Christian Sandvig, who says,

“With algorithmic culture, computers and algorithms are allowing a new level of real-time personalization and content-selection on an individual basis that just wasn’t possible before. But rather than use these tools to serve our authentic interests, we have built a system that often serves a commercial interest that is often at odds with our interests” (Russel 78).

The statistical framework underlying these conclusions is explored with the assistance of graphs in the book and has additional scholarship that extends beyond the content of this paper elsewhere (“Why algorithms can be racist and sexist” *Vox*), but for the purpose of this paper it suffices to say that algorithms that determine the reach of one’s communications on digital platforms are clearly restrictive and clearly represent a threat to users’ rhetorical power. Russell summarizes: “Clearly these filters are not neutral, and yet they operate without the knowledge or consent of the user. They shape our connective media feeds, our web searches, and in the process our worldviews” (Russell 78), drawing specific attention to that which is out of the users hands as they exist as creators and consumers.

As previously mentioned, while a digital environment provides these restrictive platforms, it also provides accessible tools with which to free oneself from them and exercise more of their rhetorical power. 350.org and Parler are perfect examples of this. The former is a website created by journalist Bill McKibben, who experienced a restriction of rhetorical power when he “spent time giving speeches and writing articles for organizations and outlets that were

doing what he believed to be good work on behalf of the environment. But as time went on...even that didn't seem substantial enough, partly because the issue of climate change was being so aggressively ignored" (Russell 118). His response was to create 350.org, "an organization specializing in grassroots campaigns aimed at politicians and the fossil fuel industry, and at building a global grassroots environmental movement using new digital tools and networks to mobilize and organize offline action"(Russell 119), thus inventing a platform (and a genre) over which he has complete control. He can control what is said, how it is said, and how it is displayed, instituting formal and content restrictions as he sees fit, and exercising a significant amount of rhetorical power in doing so.

Similarly, Parler, a social media site created by John Matze that is popular amongst American conservatives and which aims to "make the internet amazing again" (Parler) and which CNN labeled, "a platform from a parallel universe," (O'Sullivan) has become popular since its launch in September 2018. Many users of this site saw their rhetorical freedoms restricted on other platforms, so they created their own. According to Parler's home page it is a place where you can "Speak freely and express yourself openly, without fear of being "deplatformed" for your views. Engage with real people, not bots. Parler is people and privacy-focused, and gives you the tools you need to curate your Parler experience" (Parler).

Discussions of environmentalism and online censorship are beyond the reach of this paper, but what I aim to draw attention to is the ease with which McKibben and Matze were able to free themselves from their respective rhetorical boundaries by drawing new ones. McKibben's reach was being limited and some of Parler's content no doubt would not be allowed on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Their respective creators utilized accessible digital tools (one can use Squarespace, Wix, and WordPress to build a customizable website for less than \$20 per month)

to free themselves from specific rhetorical constraints by creating platforms that had have their own rules and restrictions

Conclusion

This paper proposes many ideas, central among them that digital users can be singularly or simultaneously allowed rhetorical power and restricted in their exercising of that rhetorical power on digital platforms. Explorations of when, where, and how often these occurrences take place is a subject I leave for further scholarly study and experimentation, and which I hope to have paved a path towards with this discussion of the potentialities of the subject matter. An understanding of digital platform/spaces/applications/websites as genres themselves opens one up to an understanding of how users engage and are engaged with as they spend time online and is not limited in its applicability because in the modern day the general populace, young and old, all make use of digital spaces to communicate. As Palmeri writes, “we should be wary of simplistic tales of generational divides such as Marc Prensky’s popular distinction between younger ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’”(Palmeri 113). My exploration has centralized Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, and made mention of a few others, but there are no doubt many more which form a vast array of interconnected and overlapping genre spaces to be studied.

Ideally, an understanding of the way that one’s rhetorical power is impacted when participating as users in digital spaces will allow us a more informed relationship with technology, one that includes a better understanding of the rhetoric practiced by others around us and of ourselves as rhetorical creatures. Digital platforms play no small part in the lives of the

modern citizen and so it is critical that we understand how they might enable, restrict and otherwise affect us, as well as how we may utilize them to reach our own ends. It is nothing short of critical and necessary that scholarship further explore these subjects, lest the speed of technology outpace our understanding of our rhetorical agency and we find ourselves lost.

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