Managerial Rhetoric as the Metaphor for the World Wide Web

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☐–*This article explains how metaphors influence how we experience events, and how the Web, viewed through a different metaphor or lens, currently appears a little less valuable as a tool of education or democracy. Although the Web constitutes a new communication milieu, possessing the potential to revolutionize communication in the next millennium, its rhetoric is currently one of consumerism and capitalism–economic not political ideologies pertain. This article conducts a metaphorical analysis of the World Wide Web positing that the Web might be understood best through a managerial metaphor rather than the current spatial/relational metaphor. Using Sproule's 1988 categories of managerial rhetoric, this article critiques contemporary Web practices in an effort to better understand the Web and its communicative potential.*

As Postman suggests in *Conscientious Objections,* "To have an answer without knowing the question, without understanding that you might have been given a different answer if the question had been posed differently, may be more than meaningless; it may be exceedingly dangerous" (1988, p. 26). Nevertheless, this is exactly what is taking place with the World Wide Web (WWW). Dozens of articles have been written predicting what is likely to happen with Webbed communication–the direction the Web will take, how important the Web will become, who's lives will be influenced by the Web, and who should pay attention to it (cf., Bettig, 1997; Campbell, 1995; Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997; Gustafson & Thomsen, 1996; Hansen, 1998; Harper, 1996; Marken, 1998). Indeed, given the volume of scholarship currently talking *about* the WWW, the implication seems to be that its impact is already understood.

Skepticism and criticism of new technologies in mass communication and computer science is not new (cf., Badgikian, 1990; Burnham, 1984; Postman, 1984, 1988, 1991, 1993; Schiller, 1989; Stoll, 1995). Unfortunately, critiques of new technologies often seem to come too late, taking the form of "laments for simpler times." This article explores the rhetorical characteristics of the WWW advancing a new metaphor for understanding the Web and a critical examination of the Web's rhetoric.

The Web is often touted as a panacea for many of our modern social ills

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(Clinton 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d; Gore, 1993a, 1993b; Coombs, 1998; Mitra, 1997).[1] As Mitra has suggested, "The new opportunities for communication provided by the growth of the Internet and WWW have been used for a variety of [valuable] purposes by immigrants" (p. 158). Similarly, as President Clinton recently noted at a Democratic National Convention Dinner, "Both at home and abroad, there are two great dynamics going on in the world today. One are [sic] the forces of integration that you see most positively in the growth of the Internet, [and the] Worldwide Web" (Clinton, 1999a). And as Coombs has pointed out, "The Internet offers a low cost, direct, controllable communication channel for activists" (1998, p. 299). Of course, references to the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have been on the lips of politicians, community leaders, and university administrators for close to ten years now. In spite of all the "agreement" that seems to exist regarding the importance of the Internet and the Web to business, education, and world peace, little has been written about the rhetorical imperatives of this omnipresent social force. This essay proceeds from a different set of assumptions than much of the current scholarship that makes predictions about what lies in the Web's future. This essay assumes that to understand the Internet, and especially the WWW, requires a better metaphor for describing it, and a critical evaluation of its rhetoric. This essay offers both. For the metaphor, Sproule's 1988 essay on "Managerial Rhetoric" is discussed. Based on this metaphor, a critique of the Web is offered.

The screen, the lens, or the metaphor through which one looks at the world has a profound impact on what will be seen. Just as Plato's allegory of the Cave suggests, if all one sees are shadows on the cave wall then those shadows *are,* essentially, reality. Because of the importance of perspective, then, this article begins with a discussion of metaphor.

The Value of a Metaphor

To understand the ubiquity of the Web requires a rhetorical framework within which the WWW makes sense. Burke explains the power of the metaphor when he notes that "there is really a good deal to be said for attempting to convey facts by substituting metaphors for them rather than by using the ordinary intellectual method of substituting abstractions reached by analysis" (1984, p. 95). Burke continues, explaining that,

Those who have criticized the use of metaphor have for the most part not realized how little removed such description is from the ordinary intellectual method of analysis. They have supposed that in analysis we stick to the fact itself, whereas in using metaphor we substitute for the fact to be described some quite different fact which is only connected with it by a more or less remote analogy. (p. 95)

Metaphors function as analogies or perspectives that correspond, "fact for fact," with what we are trying to describe (Burke, 1984, p. 95; cf. also Burke 1969, pp. 503–517).

Similar to Burke's observation regarding metaphor is Lakoff and Johnson's suggestion that language and metaphor are sometimes necessary components of perception. Lakoff and Johnson explain that "our conceptual system is not something that we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automati-

cally along certain lines" (1980, p. 3). Moreover, as Burnham points out, "For the fish swimming in the ocean, the comprehension of wetness is impossible. Wet requires the contrast of dry" (1984, p. 7). Metaphors help provide such contrasts. As Varan explains:

There is power in . . . metaphors. Not only do they help shape our discourse, they provide new intellectual vistas focusing attention on distinct facets of the perplexities of life. Although they cannot reduce all uncertainty to the simple models that ensue, they have contributed greatly to our ability for grasping abstractions. (1998, p. 58)

Along these lines, to understand something as dynamic and abstract as the WWW is difficult or impossible without the aid of a metaphor for contrast. Varan suggests that "such [metaphorical] analogies provide a link between academic and popular discourse. In this sense, metaphors are not only important as tools for intellectual analysis, but offer a unifying vehicle through which academics and audiences can better understand each other" (1998, p. 59).

Metaphors are analogical. Metaphors provide correspondence between the known and the unknown. And "metaphors influence thinking and communication in . . . profound ways" (Kaplan, 1990, p. 39; Kaplan 1992). According to Burke, "Metaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else" (Burke, 1969, p. 503, his emphasis). Schön explains the use of metaphors as critical tools—the sense in which they are employed here—noting that, " 'metaphor' refers both to a certain kind of product—a perspective or frame, a way of looking at things—and to a certain kind of process—a process by which new perspec-

tives on the world come into existence" (1993, p. 137).

Sproule's (1988) essay on Managerial Rhetoric is employed here in just the sense described by Schön—as a new perspective or tool for understanding the world.[2] Through Sproule's insightful perspective on the world, a clearer picture of how the Web operates and its rhetorical constraints emerge. With these considerations in mind, the next section will lay out Sproule's Managerial Rhetoric schema and discuss how each principle describes Webbed communication.

Managerial Rhetoric

Managerial Rhetoric is a form of bureaucratic rhetoric in which messages cease to possess (or require) authorial identify and instead become self-evident expressions of corporate or organizational identity. According to Sproule, managerial (or "new") rhetoric has six principles (1988; cf., also, Sproule 1989): (1) The new rhetoric focuses on providing conclusions, or packaged ideology. (2) Self-contained slogans—or capsulized ideology—are the persuasive staples of the new rhetoric. (3) The new rhetoric purveys images. (4) A corollary to the image orientation of modern persuasion is the increasing importance of interpersonal attraction and identification in social influence. (5) The new rhetoric creates its own facts. And (6), the new rhetoric treats pure entertainment as a staple of persuasion.

As previously noted by Burke, metaphors are tools for understanding something "in terms of" something else. This is how Sproule's principles are used here. Each of Sproule's principles of managerial rhetoric function as metaphors or correlates to what might be called the "old rhetoric" which was

idea centered and built from "facts" or rational argument. Of course, the "old rhetoric" is romanticized. It posited the existence of enthymemes and shared cultural values that have not exerted much force in the U.S. for at least 20 years. The old rhetoric, however, was comforting. It was literate, based on the printed word and shared vocabularies (cf. Sproule, 1988, pp. 472 f.). Nevertheless, Sproule explains that the "old rhetoric" is gone. It no longer has any cachet, or power over the realm of public discourse. Instead, society is inundated with managerial rhetoric; with rhetoric that "creates its own facts" and "draws on the power of the image." To understand the power of managerial rhetoric as a metaphor for Webbed communication each of Sproule's principles are dealt with separately in the next section. Connections are made to contemporary Webbed practice, and, where appropriate, examples are provided to illustrate claims.[3]

Principle One: Packaged Ideology

According to Sproule, Managerial Rhetoric focuses on providing conclusions, or packaged ideology–whereas, the old rhetoric gave more attention to reasons (1988, p. 472). The emphasis on appearance over content on the Web is one of the best examples of packaged ideology. All one needs to do is to review a random sample of Web sites to note that Webbed design focuses heavily on "multimedia," or packaged ideology, often over content.[4]

Consider for example Web21's "100Hot" Web site that evaluates the top ranked Web sites by category. According to the site managers, "100hot is an exciting, dynamic guide to the hottest, *most popular* content on the Web" (Web 21, Advertising, emphasis added). Elsewhere the site managers claim that,

A big advantage of our methodology over other rating services is the source of our data and the size of our sample. Web21 collects data from many different sources (Web 21, Advertising) . . . [which] represent the surfing patterns of over 100,000 surfers world-wide. . . . For 100hot Search, we rank the top 500,000 pages daily (not counting gif or jpegs). AltaVista crawls this list and creates a custom index for us every night. *100hot Search uses this index of the most popular pages as the basis for it's search* [sic]. Thus, when you use 100hot Search you can be sure you are only searching the most popular web sites (Web 21 Methodology, emphasis added).

Popularity, then, is portrayed as equivalent to content. The implication being that "you too will be satisfied"–because everyone else is–and Web 21 does not even offer any reasons except for "mass appeal."

Web 21's claims are typical of many "top 100" Web page rankings which claim to be offering "comprehensive" and "personalized" results. Although, "comprehensive" and "personalized" are really just ideographic buzzwords, unsupported by any evidence (cf., McGee, 1980; McGee & Martin, 1983). Beyond the "packaged ideology" that characterizes such sites, many "top 100" Web sites do not even pay much attention to the arguments that they do make. Most "top Web sites" reach slightly different conclusions about what the top sites are–and some do not even purport to rank the "top Web sites" but instead rank the "best" sites (PC Magazine)–"best" again being one of those terms that all understand and agree upon.[5] The point here is not to prove that Internet claims are unreliable–we know that they are–but that

what drives the claims are not such lofty ideals as "personal attention" but rather "packaged ideology" to use Sproule's terms.[6] The packaged messages approach to publics runs contrary to many of the humanistic principles upon which both the field of communication is based, and the United States teaches its citizens it is founded upon. The "value of the individual" becomes lost in attempts to "package" messages to the masses. Indeed, scholars of the Web have identified one of its strengths as the ability to bring diverse public together (Mitra, 1997; Warnick, 1999). Yet, efforts to harmonize publics and reach multiple publics are clearly in the minority if the projections about top Web sites are representative.

Principle Two: Capsulized Ideology

Sproule's second principle of Managerial Rhetoric suggests that self-contained slogans (capsulized ideology) are the persuasive staples of the new rhetoric in contrast to the enthymematic nature of the old (p. 472). As Sproule explains, because contemporary mass audiences are so diverse, "audiences of today typically carry neither a vibrant awareness of issues nor a rich common memory of cultural traditions" (p. 472). This is clearly the case with the WWW where audiences go where they desire and not where they are led (cf. Boutie, 1996; Yavovich, 1996). Because of the self-selection that occurs on the Web, individual agendas and not public issues are what drive the Web. When one listens to the radio during "drive-time," for example, commercial advertising time is sold based on estimates of the number of listeners, or, more precisely, the number of listeners who fit a particular demographic. Indeed, pub-

lic broadcasting stations (PBS) are no better, they attract institutional advertisers who wish to reach a largely educated and financially secure demographic of listeners. Web site visitors are not so easily targeted as they are with radio and television because the Web is accessed globally, 24 hours-a-day, and because the Web offers little actual "programming." The WWW is information rich–and information as entertainment rich. It possesses capsulized ideology as described by Sproule. But it contains little in the way of "programming." With only minor exceptions limited to pockets of Web-users, denizens of the WWW do not come together at chronologically the same time to collectively take part in any shared experiences–chat-rooms, (multi-user dungeons), MUDs and on-line interviews excepted.

The controversy over domain names might be the best example of the value of a self-contained slogan. A domain name is the electronic "address" (or URL) used by individuals and organizations on the Web. Although names have always played an important role in marketing and advertising, via name recognition and brand loyalty, never before has such an arbitrary thing as a name been such a factor in whether consumers are able to locate a company to purchase its products or services. On the Web, organizations rely on key words and phrases that are carefully indexed. The technology and the grammar of the Web are both driven by self-contained slogans.

The use of the Web by organizations is also radically different than an organization's presence in the traditional marketplace. Typically, organizations rely on advertising, marketing, or public relations, to get their messages out to the public. As a result of the cost and

specificity of commercial advertising and marketing, mass media messages are often short on "good reasons," in the form of carefully crafted syllogisms or enthymemes, and long on graphic identification and sloganeering. By contrast, on the Web, organizations and individuals construct their own milieu; the Web is as much a world of fantasy as is the entertainment industry. The Web has its own rhetorical landscape with chat-rooms, Listservs, MUDs, and cyber-communities. And, as much as many political leaders and administrators in higher education would have us believe in the Web's "enormous educational potential," educational sites are, ironically, one of the least represented areas on the WWW (cf., Web 21). The primary difference between the Web and the broadcast media, however, are that visitors to Web sites, like newspaper and magazine readers have consciously opted to visit Web sites. They cater to the choir. Most readers of the New York Times, for example, do not purchase it so that they can view the latest advertisements placed by the New York City department stores (although many newspaper readers do purchase local newspapers for the weekly advertisements and coupons contained therein). Similarly, most viewers of "Star Trek Voyager" do not watch the series to see the latest Pizza Hut commercials. However, in both cases, television and newspaper, audiences are exposed to "capsulized ideology." When an individual visits a Web site for either the New York Times or UPN's "Star Trek Voyager," s/he has consciously opted to learn more about, or from, *that* particular outlet. That choice is no different from an individual choosing to watch a program or read the newspaper. The key difference between the traditional mass media of print and broadcast and the WWW then, is not in the exposure of publics to "capsulized messages," but rather in the level of programmability. Either because the Web is harder to program, or because the Web is conducive to "capsulized ideology," the Web relies heavily on self-contained slogans.

Principle Three: "Images" over "Ideas"

Sproule's third principle is that the new rhetoric purveys images whereas the old focused on ideas (p. 473).[7] Having a "presence" in cyberspace is often seen as more important than the information contained therein. Many Web sites go for months, sometimes years, without being updated. Nevertheless, because Web sites are created "to be seen," and not to focus on "ideas" or to get client/customer input, their informational content is often limited.

The multimedia or image orientation of many Web sites is inescapable. Using iconic menus to order information is common in cyberspace and many Web sites are created such that they can only be navigated graphically.[8] On the Web, the image is king. Icons and graphics are used to navigate documents. Menus, or tables of contents, are organized by images. And the linearity that has characterized the written word for thousands of years no longer applies. Indeed, the concept of page numbers is not even a relevant concept on the Web. Although pages can be printed with page numbers, page numbering is arbitrary and not usually based on the webmaster's design. Navigation of Web documents is accomplished by graphic images, links, indexes, and key words–everything *but* page numbers.

Another aspect of the Web that is

relevant here is the symbolic. Not all Webbed communication is crafted in the same way or uses the same rhetorical strategies. Some Web sites, for example, rely on symbols and icons more than others do. Indeed, the coupling of the symbolic and the textual represents one of the unique rhetorical characteristics of the Web. The use of hypertext offers a radically different means of (re)presenting information neither possible on current broadcast television nor feasible on most current cable television systems. Of course, not everyone agrees that multimedia presentation should be the *raison d'etre* of webbed communication (Christians, 1990; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Silverio, 1994), but it is a prevalent feature of the Web.

Principle Four: The Increasing Importance of Interpersonal Attraction and Identification

Sproule's fourth principle states that a corollary to the image orientation of modern persuasion is the increasing importance of interpersonal attraction and identification in social influence, as contrasted to the more idea-centered ethos of classical times (1988, p. 473). One need to only survey a list of top Web sites in almost any area of interest to see that "image" (reputation, notoriety, etc.) clearly carries the day. Of the top 100 Web sites, excluding those that are accessed purely for pragmatic reasons such as search engines, only a few are heavy on "informational" content (Web 21).

According to Sproule, in managerial rhetoric one finds the identity of the *individual* persuader eclipsed by the *institutional* persuader. Historically, individuals were the source of rhetorical messages. Individuals, however, unlike managerial or institutional per-

suaders, often exercised *interpersonal* influence over opinion leaders, and not by means of mass audience appeals, as managerial or institutional persuaders do today. The individual persuader had a name, a face, a reputation, and represented certain ideas and values idiosyncratic to him/herself, and to those s/he was seeking to persuade. Under the old rhetoric, according to Sproule, the individual was ultimately responsible for the content of his/her messages. The change that has taken place with the new managerial rhetoric (NMR) has been the rise of institutional forms of persuasion in which a "reliance upon media to reach [the] mass audience" has occurred (Sproule, 1988, p. 470). Under the NMR, speakers, or communicators, are no longer individuals but instead representatives of institutions and corporations. With the NMR, the source is obscured, and the individual is merely an agent for an unseen group of others. Private Web pages are an excellent example of persuaders identities being masked. The visitor to a private Web site neither has a relationship with the site host, nor is able in most cases to discern if the site host is indeed who s/he says s/he is. Furthermore, as anyone who has ever ventured into an on-line chat-room knows, a communicants' gender, appearance, background, and experience, is impossible to verify (unless some other communication medium is employed), and is often intentionally "exaggerated."

Organizational Web sites are excellent examples of this. Take for example any well-known search engine: AltaVista, Infoseek, Lycos, Magellan, Netscape, WebCrawler, or Yahoo. Most of these sites advertise, and what they base their appeals to advertisers on is audience reach. Advertising on a Web site however, is not as scientific as

advertising in a magazine, on the radio, or on television. Advertisements placed in mass circulation magazines or in the broadcast media can target very well defined audiences. Advertisements placed on search engine Web sites, however, are more like what an accountant friend calls "WAGs" (or wild guesses). Everyone an advertiser seeks to reach might come on any particular day–or no one they are trying to reach might come. It is a "crap shoot." Most Internet Web sites cannot even provide very detailed information about the kinds of visitors that they *do* attract–except for "cookies" (or information) about what a visitor searches for, or where s/he goes in a site.

The search engine Web site is an excellent example of what Sproule means by "interpersonal attraction being a staple of the new rhetoric" (1988, p. 473). Very few users spend much time–or any time–investigating which search engine might best suit their needs, or even who owns and operates the search engine they use. Search engines are more often than not chosen by "default," because the friend/colleague/teacher who taught you how to use the Internet used it, or because the computer or software they are using automatically opens to a particular site. Most individuals' use of the WWW is based on random chance, luck, or popularity–everything but the "good reasons" which Sproule suggests characterized rhetorics of the past. Web sites, even "personal" Web sites are "corporate" in nature. That is, the individual(s) who maintain Web sites are never really present–much like how corporations are represented by individuals but they can never represent themselves. Web sites are "abstrac-

tions." And, although it is technologically possible to use real time "Web cameras" and voice transmission software, such exchanges are in the minority and are not representative of the Web's real strength–which is anonymity and individual exploration.

Principle Five: The Use of "Facts" in Rhetorical Messages

According to Sproule's fifth principle, the old rhetoric was built from facts, whereas the new rhetoric creates its own facts (p. 473). Web documents possess an "aura" of credibility. That aura is ascribed to Webbed documents because they can appear so "factual." With only a few minutes of time invested in design, a Web page can incorporate color, images, tables, rules, and other design features not normally a part of "everyday" textual messages. One of the ironies of the Web is that many Web sites draw their credibility in part from the credibility ascribed to published documents–books, newspapers, magazines. Webbed documents are often perceived as accurate and trustworthy documents because they "appear" accurate and trustworthy (Kent, 1999; Marken, 1995). The appearance of credibility and the fact that many consumers of Webbed information, even the most educated users (college students and professionals), lack the media literacy necessary to evaluate Webbed documents[9] is the reason that the Web is perceived by many as constituted of "good information." Indeed, each successive generation raised with the Web is becoming increasingly more sophisticated at locating information on the Web (McCollum, 1998); but, as has been the case with television for decades, U.S. students have

acquired few critical skills with which to evaluate media (cf., Kubey, 1998).

Governmental advocates of the Internet and the WWW have taken for granted the assumption that "access to information" is of inherent value to all citizens–assuming mistakenly, that access to information, or "facts," includes the context for understanding. Most politicians, however, in their rush to get every school connected to the "information superhighway" have ignored the overtly capitalistic/consumerist nature of the Web. Indeed, consumerism is fine; we live in a capitalistic society. No one, however, is in a hurry to get every school hooked up to the Home Shopping Network or to the Playboy Channel, which is what much of the content of the Web currently consists of. Although we have no evidence to prove that Webbed communication is better than other forms of mediated communication, the Web has created its own reasons (or facts):

- To make workers more productive–and documents more entertaining.
- To teach research skills.
- To retrieve "essential" up-to-the-minute information.
- To prepare students for the fast paced world accelerating outside the walls of their school.

While these may seem like good reasons, many of the characteristics of the WWW lauded for school children have very little to do with learning. Students who do all of their research with the WWW often fail to learn library and archival research skills. "Up-to-the-minute information" is *irrelevant* in most fields. Students can learn computer skills–the majority of which they *will* need in the real world–

without ever venturing onto the Web. Thus, while the Web may be fun and interesting to school-children, it is hardly essential to the acquisition of a "good education."

Principle Six: Entertainment as Persuasion

Sproule's sixth and final principle is that the new rhetoric treats pure entertainment as a staple of persuasion, whereas the old used entertainment as another vehicle for presenting ideas (p. 473). Although it is not in vogue these days to find fault with the Web, the new-world-order predicated on computer information systems like the WWW might not be all that appealing if the importance of the typographic word atrophies in the tradeoff. As Postman, paraphrasing Bertrand Russell, insightfully pointed out almost ten years ago in a discussion with Camille Paglia: "Bertrand Russell . . . said that the purpose of education was to teach each of us to defend ourselves against the 'seduction of eloquence.' In the realm of the word, we learn the specific techniques used to resist these seductions: logic, rhetoric, and literary criticism" (Postman & Paglia, 1991). Again, the Web is all about the "seduction of eloquence," or more accurately, the seduction of "aesthetics." As Sproule laments, "the new rhetoric treats pure entertainment as a staple of persuasion." "Information"–disembodied, unconnected, and lacking context–is rampant on the Web. Persuasion based on "good ideas" is rarer. Web sites are intentionally designed to be "entertaining." Because "entertainment" is what brings publics back to Web sites. Should this be a core feature of an "educational" medium? The answer is of course "no." Nevertheless, it is.

Webbed rhetors, with only a few exceptions, are not in the business of informing–they are in business. It is hardly surprising then that persuasion is more common than "good ideas." The next section of this article brings together the managerial metaphor found in Sproule with a critique of Webbed practices.

A Web Critique: Persuasion and Information on the WWW

If the Web, as argued previously, represents the ultimate in managerial rhetoric, then what does that mean for the construction of persuasive, informative, and dialogic messages? How can "accurate" or "truthful" information be bifurcated from propaganda? How can the quality of content be raised without compromising the freedom to communicate offered by the Web? The recent high school tragedies, such as what occurred at Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999, are perhaps some of the best examples of how the ready access to information, free of even minor editorial oversight, can play a role in the lives of thousands.[10]

Over the last decade, the omnipresence of the Web has become inescapable. The Web is touted as a panacea for our nation's ills, with politicians all the way from the executive branch on down to local school boards singing its praises. Many academicians and professionals however, have become concerned about the dangers posed by the Web to standards of intellectuality and rigor (Ellison, 1998; Kent, 1998/1999; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Stoll, 1995). Virtually any person or organization can post messages to Web sites without editorial or professional oversight. And

because information on the Web is couched in "factual" terms, its content is often accepted without question.

Sproule's principles of managerial rhetoric have an eerie fit with the WWW, especially for a list of rhetorical principles generated over ten years ago. As a metaphor, "managerial rhetoric" comes closer than many other more popular metaphors for describing the Web. The "information superhighway," for example, is clearly not accurate since "information is currently not one of the Web's strong suits. And "the Web," the metaphor on which the WWW's name is based, is deceptive because it suggests an "interconnectedness," which is certainly true of the hardware of the Internet, but is not true of the majority of the users of the WWW.

As the managerial metaphor suggests, the Web is composed of diverse communities guided more by organizational principles of anonymity than by communal principles of collaboration and camaraderie. Just as books, radio, television, and the cinema are all subject to certain technical conventions and constraints, the Web is also guided by technical and creative limitations. The Web is influenced by bandwidth constraints, limitations of its programming languages, and the fact that it is not subject to (network) programming the way that radio and television are. In terms of content, the Web contains sites that draw on related and coherent rhetorical messages such as educational sites, public information, special interest, political, and organizational discourse. The Web is characterized both by genres of "content"–such as technology, search, and education Web sites–and genres of "form" embodied in its technological infrastructure. What is perhaps most essential to understand

about Webbed communication in general, however, is that it *is* prefaced on a logic–the logic of "managerial communication," not a "Web." This is the metaphor that is needed to provide an understanding of its scope and path.

Managerial Communication and the WWW

A generic critique of the Web in light of Sproule's managerial features highlights several characteristics of the Web. First, visitors to Web sites are self-selected. They are a bit like the actual audience physically in attendance for a political speech or rally. However, political speeches usually target wider audiences than simply those physically in attendance at an event. Web sites do not target the mass audience. Most Web sites are not couched as responses to rhetorical situations but rather are ideologic–or examples of managerial rhetoric. As Yavovich explains:

Search services now available on the World Wide Web, such as Yahoo: Excite, and Alta Vista, represent the emergence of a totally new type of media and marketing infrastructure and indicate a fundamental shift in the marketing communications (marcomm) process. These services mark the early instance where the message is driven mainly by customer pull instead of vendor push. Thus, it is becoming critical for marketers to alter their thinking and to start dedicating resources to efforts that will facilitate the pull part of the marcomm process. (1996, p. 31; cf. also, Boutie, 1996)

A second feature of the WWW implicated in Sproule's metaphor is a continued interest in persuasion. Like the "old" rhetoric, managerial rhetoric is concerned with interpersonal and social influence. As Sproule points out, "With the twentieth century advent of marketing and advertising research, the

crowd could be more easily compartmentalized" (1988, p. 475). Sproule continues, explaining that,

Under the sway of managerial rhetoric, contemporary society marches to a new rhetorical cadence. . . . [Rhetoric is n]o longer addressed primarily to the informed citizen, . . . modern communication is beamed to the harried modern consumer who, . . . hurriedly chooses among a few truncated commercial and political images. (p. 474)

Indeed, persuasion, or sales, is the goal of many Web sites. By use of increasingly sophisticated tracking methods Web site hosts gather and solicit as much information about users as possible (cf. Bettig, 1997; Botan, 1996; Elmer, 1997; Strenski, 1995). As Elmer explains, "driven by a cynical and all-encompassing desire for consumer profits . . . commercial Web pages in general, incorporate strategies, tactics and . . . *techniques* of demographic and psychographic 'solicitation' " (1997, p. 186, emphasis in original). In fact, many Web site will not even allow visitors to explore their sites without first granting permission to be catalogued and to have their interests and preferences tracked.[11]

A decade ago, when Sproule outlined his theory of managerial rhetoric he pointed out that with it, more attention is paid to the mass audience and to bureaucratic forms of persuasion aimed at individuals and not the mass audience (1988, p. 470). In essence, the persuasion of the WWW, prefaced on managerial persuasion, seeks to predict, control, and alter the behavior of the masses through the individual. In their tradeoff for (imagined) "anonymity," freedom of expression, and the ability to obtain "valuable" information 24 hours-per-day, users of the Web

are codified, commodified, and compartmentalized.

Concurrent with the "information" explosion on the Web has come its appropriation by many of the intellectual elite as the penultimate information gathering tool. As Ross and Middleberg, point out, the Web is rapidly becoming one of the primary information gathering tools by newspaper and magazine editors (1997; cf., also Middleberg and Ross, 1999a, 1999b). As the Chronicle of Higher Education noted, each generation of students raised with the Web is coming to rely on it more and more (McCollum, 1998). And as every college teacher these days knows, the idea of using the library for research has become as obsolete as the slide-rule and the abacus. The WWW is the research medium of choice for most college students.

Although some valuable information currently resides on the WWW, much of its content consists of personal opinion, diatribe, and propaganda. It is this third area that is of particular interest to communication scholars, and the area that comes closest to what Sproule described as "managerial," or a new, and potentially dangerous, rhetorical form (1988). Sproule suggests that managerial rhetoric involves: the rise of corporate identities rather than individual identities, the fragmentation of publics, the use of mass media to target specific publics, and the increasing difficulty of identifying the actual source of messages. As Sproule explains:

The new rhetoric focuses on providing conclusions–that is, packaged ideology–whereas, the old rhetoric gave relatively more attention to reasons. [And] . . . self-contained slogans (capsulized ideology) are the persuasive staples of the new rhetoric in contrast to the enthymematic operation of the old. (p. 472)

Webbed communication also represents a unique departure from a speech broadcast on television or radio, since the Web offers multiple channels of information accompanying the message. A visitor to the Web can "view" a televised event such as a speech or lecture and also "download" or record it, look up some issue related to the speech, read an accompanying text, and also share comments with other viewers across the globe all at the same time. Apart from the multi-channeled capacity of the Web is the fact that the Web is self-selected by interactants and not passively received. The Web is sought out. The Web is actually representative of what *that* particular interactant has selected to experience at *that* particular time. In contrast, television and radio are passively received. Viewers/listeners *do* choose to experience particular broadcasts at preselected times, however, the phenomena of channel surfing and listening to the radio during "drive time," make receivers subject to the decisions of program managers and advertisers (Altman, 1987). By contrast, the Web is difficult to program. Individuals and organizations can place advertisements anywhere they choose–just as radio and television are available to anyone that is willing to pay. However, because the "programming" on the Web is so diverse, using the Web effectively for advertising is a bit like trying to choose the right station from among 10,000 possible choices. The up side of the diversity of the Web is that organizations and individuals with Web sites know that *all,* or *most,* visitors to their sites have consciously chosen to visit. Although some genre specific "site surf-

ing" does occur via link pages and "Web rings," most users will not "accidentally" surf past the "learning channel," "PBS," or the "History Channel." Again, the rhetoric of the Web is one of pull not push (Boutie, 1996; Yavovich, 1996). The down side of the diversity on the Web is that sites operating within the same general area (or genre) are forced to compete using the Web's composition: the icon, the image, the sound, the "whirling, spinning, flaming, logo," and not in the realm of good ideas as policy makers have recently suggested the Web functions.

Conclusion

The goals of this essay have been modest: to explain how metaphors influence how we experience events; and to explain how the Web, viewed through a different metaphor or lens, currently appears a little less valuable as a tool of education or democracy. Although the Web constitutes a new communication milieu, possessing the potential to revolutionize communication in the next millennium, its rhetoric is currently one of consumerism and capitalism–economic not political ideologies pertain.

Sproule's managerial rhetoric concepts provide an alternative model for understanding the Web and perhaps may lead to a reevaluation of the Web as an academic tool. Of course, the Web has already become too ubiquitous and powerful a communication medium to be ignored, or abandoned to the hordes of venture capitalist interested in turning a buck. However, be-

fore the use of the Web becomes too entrenched in the academy and the business world for changes to be made, its usefulness needs to be reassessed.

Certain insights have emerged as a result of this critique. For example, the application of print and broadcast standards of excellence would go a long way toward improving the quality and accuracy of information found on the Web. Similarly, encouraging publication standards and principles of editorial oversight might lead to more trustworthy and accurate information on the Web. Finally, imposing some programming order to the Web's chaos might allow for more coherent and useful information dissemination.

What is perhaps the most important point to come away from this essay with is to recognize that we are all inventing the Web as we go along–but we (academicians) are also one of the driving forces. Letting the Web "run roughshod over us" is probably not the best approach to a communication medium with tens of millions of users world-wide. The Web as we now know it is not connecting citizens to each other, as the metaphor implies, but rather, connecting citizens to organizations and institutions. It is managerial not harmonizing. It identifies "publics" as much as it brings citizens together. If the WWW is going to live up to its lofty potential then "democracy," or "dialogue," must be the guiding metaphors and not "management." Indeed, if the Web could only live up to its metaphorical namesake it would be priceless.

Notes

[1]A search of presidential archives in 1999 (January–April) reveals literally hundreds of references to the Internet and the World Wide Web by the President, Vice President, and his

administration in radio addresses, policy speeches, dinners, and the State of the Union address (White House Archives).

[2]For more detailed discussions of the different views of metaphor see Ortony (1993), and White (1973, pp. 31–38).

[3]Additional discussions of Sproule's "Managerial Rhetoric" framework are unknown to this author–outside of Sproule's other works. However, excellent treatments of "bureaucratic rhetoric," a form of managerial rhetoric, can be found in the following texts: Blair, Brown, and Baxter, 1994; Cooper and Nothstine, 1998; Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland, 1994; Nothstine and Copeland, 1989).

[4]That Web sites focus so heavily on multimedia is ironic given that virtually all guides to Web site design emphasize the use of "visual design principles" over the "smoke and mirrors" that characterizes many sites (cf. Lemay, 1996; Levine, 1995). Poor Webbed design is doubly ironic given that most corporate Web sites are designed by trained "experts/specialists" and not simply by everyday citizens. To find out that your neighbor has a poorly conceived Web site is probably not surprising; to find out that Apple Computers or the Microsoft Corporation does, is surprising.

[5]Beyond the inconsistent rankings of the "top" Web pages, is the fact that there are some obvious methodological flaws in the research. Web 21, for example, ranks its own "Consumer Usage" (as of September, 1998) at 3,000,000 total visitors per month (Web 21, Advertising). Yet, "My Virtual Reference Desk," a competing "top 100" Web site, claims that "based on data from 1,606,502 documents on over 259,847 different servers . . . last updated on Monday, June 16, 1998," the top three Web sites were: 1. Welcome to Netscape (with 84,052 hits), 2. Yahoo! (with 35,818 hits), and 3. WebCounter Home Page (with 30,394 hits) (My Virtual Reference Desk). Although My Virtual Reference Desk is short on particulars about how they arrived at their numbers, let us assume that their estimates are for a one one-day time period. If we take Netscape, the number one ranked site on June 16, and multiply its 84,052 hits by 30, we come up with 2,521,560 hits in a one-month period. A number that is half-a-million hits short of Web 21's "alleged" 3,000,000 hits per month. Although Web 21's usage might have dropped off a bit in the past six months, it seems reasonable that they could at least compete with 50th ranked HP with only 73,860 hits in a 30-day period. Yet, Web 21 appears nowhere on My Virtual Reference Desk's list of top 100 sites.

[6]According to Web 21, adult sites are excluded from their data of most popular sites–except for their list of "top 100 *adult* sites." In a graph located on Web 21's Web site they indicate that the top Web sites by category are "technology" and "adult"–in that order, and by wide margins over search engines, sports, games, or colleges.

[7]By "image" Sproule implies both "reputation" and "picture" or "icon."

[8]For a dramatic illustration of the image orientation of the Web try to conduct some research using the Web with the "auto load images" option turned off. You will discover two things: (1) your search engine will run much faster with images turned off; and (2) many Web sites will be incomprehensible, indeed, inaccessible, without the aid of their images.

[9]See for example the *Journal of Communication,* 1998, Media Literacy Symposium, which contained nine articles on media literacy.

[10]As a side note, following the shooting at Columbine high school I went to the Internet to see just how easy it really is to find information on bomb making. I put three words into my search engine: "pipe bomb instructions." In about three minutes, including the time spent conducting the search, I was able to obtain detailed instructions for the making of pipe bombs, molotov cocktails, home-made high-temperature fuses, wiring swimming pool motors to explode, and suggestions for how to "kill someone with your bare hands."

[11]An excellent example of users being forcing to provide personal information and allowing themselves to be tracked before they can visit a site can be found on "The New York Times" Web page. There, users are told that "cookies are harmless and allow the newspaper to better serve the user." Another interesting example of the computer industry itself trying to make it easier for users to be tracked is the recent case of Intel's Pentium III chip which would have allowed computers

with the chip to be identified via individual chip serial numbers. In effect, users could not have avoided surveillance, tracking, or solicitation.

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