Reviews


Reviewed by Michelle Comstock, University of Colorado at Denver

Reviews of books on media and communication technologies often focus on their timeliness, that is, whether the books’ arguments have any exigency beyond their transitory, market-driven objects of study. In Critical Literacy in a Digital Era, Barbara Warnick addresses this very fixation on newness and speed, as well as on the pervasive belief in the inevitability of technological progress. Tracing this “new libertarian” ideology through the various popular discourses surrounding contemporary communication technologies, Warnick “makes use of a critical literacy framework that is built on the principle that everyone should, insofar as possible, become aware of what is assumed, unquestioned, and naturalized in our media experience.” Underlying this principle of critical consciousness is the classical philo-political notion of the “public interest.” For Warnick, protecting the public’s interest requires the ability to deliberate on media discourse, to engage in an ongoing practice of public discussion and “citizen involvement” in the critical examination of media policy toward community and social justice.

“Critical literacy,” Warnick argues, “encourages a reflective, questioning stance toward the forms and content of print and electronic media.” In this case, it is a stance bolstered by rhetorical criticism and the examination of how media messages are designed for certain groups. Warnick’s rhetorical framework—grounded in Burke, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca—is a dynamic, constructivist approach to language as “symbolic action.” “Citizens,” she claims, “who are alerted to the idea that all media representations are constructions will be more inclined to distinguish between advertising and news, detect media stereotyping, recognize digital manipulation, and question the legitimacy of anonymous or vaguely authored Web sites.” How one moves from this critical stance to a shared table of deliberation and collective citizen involvement remains unclear. Unfortunately, the political ideal of collective deliberation for the most part remains just that—an ideal outside the text’s closely circumscribed critical reading practices. What the text does offer, however, are the critical-rhetorical tools necessary for rooting out the ideological subtexts implied in the popular discourses of new communication technologies. That these happen to be familiar, well-worn tools in the areas of computers and composition and computer-mediated commu-
nication does not make Warnick's project any less compelling or significant.

Warnick's approach is "qualitative" and "descriptive," involving a richly layered discourse analysis of rhetorical communication ("situated textual appeals") in general periodicals and on World Wide Web sites designed for large audiences. Also historical in nature, her case studies trace ideological and structural changes in Wired magazine from 1993 to 1999, in popular texts aimed at inviting women online from the early to the late 1990s, and in political parody Web sites from the 2000 and 1996 presidential campaigns.

Chapter one, "The 'New Frontier' in Cyberspace," criticizes Wired magazine's "largely ceremonial and laudatory rather than deliberative" discourse on technological development. Warnick is at her best when identifying and cataloguing the rhetorical features (for example, style, genre, and forms of argument) of a group or "system" of texts. Particularly fine is her rendering of textual detail. In her treatment of "GenEquity," an article representative of Wired's early focus on young entrepreneurs and capitalist enterprise, Warnick defines the narrative elements necessary to this 1999 fairy tale of the future: an image of Silicon Valley as a mecca, "a land of opportunity in the classic American sense"; money as a sign of success and identity; and an asceticism that privileges tireless work over friends and community. While Warnick proceeds to highlight what is missing in this picture of technological progress (for example, the presence of non-whites and women), connections to an overall theory of oppression or agency are thin and the ideological critique indicative of "critical literacy" is underdeveloped. Warnick, instead, ascribes a generalized political libertarianism to Wired writers and readers, which she claims attributes to an ongoing, deliberate indifference to race and gender issues. Her argument—too broad in its application—would have benefited from some political discussion on the shifting tenets of American libertarianism and its cyberpunk manifestations, as well as a more sustained critical look at the ways identity and subjectivity often work against such neat political categories. Despite this, Warnick's book has important implications for classroom practice. Her analysis of Wired, for example, provides a strong instantiation of the powerful myth of technological progress—a myth now so transparent my students rarely recognize it. Their frustrations with computer and communication technologies are read as personal failings, not the result of poor design or exploitative production and distribution practices. Warnick, fortunately, gives this insidious myth some much-needed, concrete exposure.
In chapter two, "Maculining the Feminine: Inviting Women Online ca. 1997," Warnick grapples with some of the same categorical conflicts inherent in chapter one. How, for example, does one define man/woman, masculine/feminine in a digital era, when these very notions are under rapid reconstruction? Warnick’s theories of gender, sex, or sexuality remain, for the most part, tacit. While the chapter sets out to “consider how the presence and promise of new technologies might affect how women think about themselves and their relation to such technologies,” we never really get a sense of the dynamic relationship between gender and technological discourses. According to Warnick, the chapter’s emphasis is “on the ways masculine gender constructions—aggressiveness, resourcefulness, opportunism, and technical proficiency—are highlighted in discourse designed to appeal to women.” How this might entail a masculinization of the feminine, however, is unclear. It isn’t until late in the chapter that Warnick parenthetically refers to the cybergrrl adoption of “identities colored by stereotypically male traits such as independence, aggression, and technological know-how” as a masculinizing process. Unfortunately, it is a process dependent upon a largely unstated feminine ideal and an undefined notion of “women’s ways of being in the world.”

Nevertheless, for students and researchers of women online, Warnick’s chapter provides a detailed historical index of the various “invitations” directed toward “unconnected” women (consumers) in the early to mid 1990s. True to their kind, the invitations drew on a powerful affective combination of shame and desire in order to market the new communication technologies. “Women,” Warnick argues, “were doubly disempowered. Grappling with the homework of family care, frequently marginalized in the workplace, sexually harassed offline and potentially online as well, they themselves were supposed to take the blame for not being more technologically savvy.” Warnick’s rhetorical analysis deftly moves from early discussions of online culture in popular women’s print magazines to those in cybergrrl sites and e-zines. Regarding the latter, she writes: “Cybergrrl narratives implicitly make use of dissociation to distinguish the technophile group of female Web site authors from the very group they are ostensibly trying to invite online. They welcome their sisters to the new communication environment but only so long as they are able to fend for themselves and become acculturated to the conventions, mores, and self-protections necessary to successful survival in the online environment.” Though generally astute, Warnick’s reading glosses over the more local political effects of grrl sites, like Geekgirl and Net Chick. RosieX, for example, did more than simply create and publish
*Geekgirl*; she initiated and facilitated computer workshops for working class and poor young women all over Australia, many of whom became regular contributors to her zine. Granted, most cybergrrrl sites were less responsible for getting women online than they were in fashioning new grrrl identities vis-à-vis the rhetorical and political strategies of parody, a Web-friendly genre that Warnick addresses in her third chapter.

"Parody With a Purpose: Online Political Parody in the 2000 Campaign," is Warnick’s best attempt at drawing connections between texts and the construction of audiences into interest groups, political factions, and pockets of consumerism. Rather conservatively, Warnick asserts that sites like gwbus.com and Georgybusm.com “did not substantially influence the outcome of the election” though “they appeared to be quite popular.” While the sites may not have changed voter choices, it is my sense that the parodies did provide a platform for a more general critique of electoral policies and the larger disenfranchising effects of the current political system.

The chapter’s strength lies in Warnick’s careful explanation of the sites’ shifting rhetorical architectures. She shows how the “coincidence and synchrony of texts” linked to the parody sites functions to “hail audiences of readers who are able to appreciate humor because of their ability to understand certain intertextual references and allusions.” At the same time, her comparison of the 1996 and 2000 campaign sites reveals how “discursive activity has become more constrained and more highly structured because of increased regulation and commercialization of the Internet.” Despite this increased commercialization, the Internet, she argues, does continue to offer unique opportunities for political lampoon and parody “that distinguish it from print and other media.” Parodies of home page speeches and photos, for example, “can be effective because of users’ familiarity with the original home page texts.” Warnick also notes that the intertextuality invoked on these sites is a “form of interreference among texts in which an already-familiar text is invoked or played on in a new textual contest.” She hedges on the liberatory effects of this intertextuality, however, claiming that it does not, as Landow argues, open up texts in a synchronic play of signs but allows the site to function “successfully by their placement in a bounded and circumscribed discursive universe.” Warnick concludes the chapter much in much the same way she opens it—hesitant to ascribe any real political viability to these sites. “[O]nline political parody,” she writes, “might attract and interest some people who otherwise might be uninvolved in politics, but it does so at the cost of playing into existing stereotypes and
giving the illusion of political participation.” This final point seems almost prescient, as the Web, now home to a whole new generation of parodic, self-referential pundits and cartoonists, becomes more performative than interactive. Here again Warnick provides a language and method for noting, if not changing, this discursive trend.

In her concluding chapter, Warnick questions the long-term effectiveness of a new political animal known as the “netizen”: “Would not the concept of the netizen reinscribe power differentials that correspond to technological development, associating the more technologically developed netizens with a more developed humanity?” Instead, she calls for a more effective counternarrative to the “beguiling narrative” that technology will provide a “bright future of unending economic prosperity, prolonged life, and startling advances in biotechnology and medicine.”

The fact that a counternarrative with widespread public appeal does not yet exist, according to Warnick, is a problem insofar as we “can anticipate a promising future enabled by new technology only when the public thoroughly understands all the alternatives available and the means of choosing between them.” While her conclusions regarding an overarching, far reaching counternarrative may be correct, Warnick’s description of the pro- and anti-technology political standoff would benefit from the work of technology critic, Andrew Feenberg. Schooled in the Frankfurt tradition of critical theory, Feenberg offers teachers and students important strategies for situating technologies as social processes. His constructivist approach to technology goes a long way in significantly challenging instrumental theories (often pro-technology) that locate technology in the neutral realm of transferable scientific truth, as well as substantive theories (often anti-technology) that locate technology in the whole of social life, or as a new type of cultural system that restructures the entire social world as an object of control. Technology, Feenberg argues, is not a thing but an ambivalent process of development suspended between different possibilities. Continuing to choose and implement democratic practices in design, production, and distribution may prove to be more viable than any one counternarrative.

Overall, Warnick’s selection of sites (“systems of texts”) helps us redefine our conventional notions of text, authorship, and audience, but the book could go further toward challenging our traditional categories of gender, race, and class. I do not believe the problem is oversight, as Warnick is obviously well-read and adept in a number of disciplines. Instead, it may be a result of the inherent tensions between a rhetorical analysis focused on dynamic audience and message construction and a
critical literacy grounded in a stable, universalized set of terms (for example, citizenship, nation, politics). We are supposed to know, along with Warnick, what all these terms mean ahead of time. In a recent *PMLA* article ["Digital Networks and Citizenship," 117.1, 98–103], Mark Poster argues that "Western concepts and political principles such as the rights of man and the citizen, however progressive a role they played in history, may not provide an adequate basis of critique in our current, increasingly global condition. They may not provide, that is, a vehicle for thinking through and mobilizing a planetary democratic movement." Instead of relying on existing political formations, such as nationhood, he suggests we question whether the new media promotes the construction of new political forms not tied to historical territorial powers. Though Warnick’s book does not offer the theoretical groundwork for these new formations, it can help us make sense of the often conflicting rhetorics surrounding contemporary communication technologies. The current military and civilian use of the Internet for the “spread of democracy” is an example that immediately comes to mind.

I could close by discussing Warnick’s book in the context of other rhetorical studies of Web and new media communication, such as work by Richard Lanham, Laura Gurak, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher. Instead, I want to put it into the political context of current world events and international struggles for peace. Warnick’s call for a counternarrative—a critical literacy in the face of rhetorics of technological progress and future—provides a perspective for the unfolding (unraveling) events of Spring 2003—namely, a global anti-war movement conducted primarily through Internet, Web, and text messaging media. Warnick’s argument that the highly commercialized platforms of the World Wide Web have failed to provide forums for democratic deliberation has haunted my daily visits to sites dedicated to alternative news media and peace movements. For those lucky enough to access it, the World Wide Web has mobilized peace organizations, forged political anti-war coalitions, and provided “un-embedded” war and peace reportage from strategic points around the world. Over the last year, I have been struck by the coalition-building potential of the Internet for mobilizing hundreds of groups for on-the-spot demonstrations and petitions. Because no central decision-making authority exists, peace rallies have also been more localized, appealing to people who don’t live in areas associated with social protest. Ironically, the “problem” of no one platform (ideologically or geographically) has prompted many rallies to get rid of any sort of central stage in favor of flexible models of mobilization,
models which stress coalitions over individual political agendas. Digital media has also encouraged organizers to keep regular track of government action and move protest dates and locations at the last minute in order to maximize diplomatic effects. Ironically (though true to the history of technology), the same communication technology that allows military personnel to navigate smart bombs and armored tanks from a distance is also providing the means for spontaneous forms of civic deliberation and political engagement. With its focus on the dynamic of symbolic action in media discourses, Critical Literacy in a Digital Era can help us begin to make sense of these contradictions, as well as their far-reaching effects on global audiences and populations.


Reviewed by Lee Campbell, Valdosta State University

Dramatizing and concretizing his concerns in A Geopolitics of Academic Writing, Suresh Canagarajah relates his own experience writing a research article (RA) while he was employed at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka during the 1990s. He uses the pseudonym Raj, whose experiences Canagarajah presents as emblematic of the challenges faced by the world’s “periphery” scholars as they attempt to participate in knowledge construction. As I read Raj’s story of his writing of an RA, my mind created its own alter ego, Larry, as he worked to produce an RA while employed by a regional state university in the American South, part of what Canagarajah calls the world’s “center” of knowledge construction. Here are summaries of the two stories:

Raj had developed a strong thesis on code switching but was aware of the publication in the United States of new books that threatened to make his contribution irrelevant. However, he lacked access to these works, being able to read only a review of them that a friend had copied not in (Tamil) Jaffna, but the distant (Sinhalese) capital. Raj was also faced with concrete obstacles such as the following: he had been forced to abandon his home when the Sri Lankan army advanced, losing his original notes;