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### Temptation and Its Discontents: Digital Rhetoric, Flow, and the Possible

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## **Temptation and Its Discontents: Digital Rhetoric, Flow, and the Possible**

*This essay explores the role of rhetoric in everyday online activities, arguing that scholarship in digital rhetoric can be informed by Raymond Williams's theory of media flow. Turning to Martin Heidegger and John Poulakos, I argue that the Web's rhetoric of the possible encourages a momentum of text consumption by which users are tempted to further immerse themselves in a "flowing" media experience. As digital technologies provide new opportunities for the surveillance and personalization of our Web practices, this article concludes by encouraging scholars to be critical of the tempting possibilities—and possible selves—crafted by this rhetoric.*

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A number of rhetoric scholars have turned their attention to digital media, analyzing their multimodality (Kress; Lauer; Selfe), their innovations of genre (Losh; Miller and Shepherd), and the new etiquettes and socialities they foster (Gurak and Antonijevic; Jensen).<sup>1</sup> As the most popular and widespread textual form of the new media, the World Wide Web has received much of this attention. To analyze the Web through a rhetorical lens, rhetoricians have modified their traditional theories of the spoken and printed word to accommodate digital texts that are bustling with video, still and moving images, sound, and the pervasive temptations of hyperlinks. Yet the transition to a digitally informed rhetoric, as James Zappen observes, is still very much in the works:

The concept of a digital rhetoric is at once exciting and troublesome. It is exciting because it holds promise of opening new vistas of opportunity for rhetorical studies and troublesome because it reveals the

difficulties and the challenges of adapting a rhetorical tradition more than 2,000 years old to the conditions and constraints of new digital media. (319)

The social and textual transformations wrought by digital media have imposed new challenges upon scholars of rhetoric, who are striving to apply their traditional concepts to technological innovations that are rapidly changing the ways we read, shop, and socialize.

Emphasizing that Web users can customize their textual experience in ways that audiences of a speech or pamphlet cannot, many critics have acknowledged that a key novelty of digital textuality is the way in which it has “liberated” audiences (Smelik and Lykke 117). Indeed, because the Web is a vast network of interlinked texts, one of its audience’s central consumption competencies is the following of links to unanticipated sites, topics, and activities. For example, after accessing a news website to check the stock market, one might soon find oneself immersed in the details of a recent political scandal, commenting on a story about the risks facing an endangered species, or even trailing off to Facebook to “share” a provocative news commentary. While this liberation of the audience is an important aspect of the digital experience, the Web nevertheless confronts us with a highly structured rhetorical environment that keeps us weaving in and between sites. By the rhetorical gravity of their links, certain elements of a digital text tempt users by offering a relatively narrow system of possibilities for action (see Khalifa and Shen); and this happens, of course, if one is on a user-generated website like *Wikipedia*, a commercial site like *CNN.com* that is driven by personalized ads, or even a social networking site like Facebook. In effect, these temptations contribute to an atmosphere of what critic Raymond Williams calls “flow,” which is the rhetorical means by which media consumers are continuously enticed to devote more of their time to a particular media experience.

This article meets Barbara Warnick’s challenge to analyze how Web users “take up texts in different ways based on the possibilities for consumption offered by the text’s authors” and to pinpoint the rhetoric by which websites “encourage users’ participation in the texts that they read” (122). I will mainly focus, therefore, on what Warnick calls “user-to-document interactivity.”<sup>2</sup> To carry out this analysis, I begin by demonstrating how Williams’s concept of flow can be applied to the rhetoric of online human-computer interaction (HCI). Then, after arguing that many critics have overestimated the decentralization and randomness of the digital experience—leading them to a rather antirhetorical understanding of online HCI—I turn to Martin Heidegger and John Poulakos to argue that Web interactivity is driven by a rhetoric of the possible that pushes users to continuously renegotiate their online activities within structured flows. To demonstrate

how these flows are rhetorically generated and governed, I analyze pages from two of the most popular sites on the Web, both of which exhibit distinct characteristics of current Web technology<sup>3</sup>; first, I look at an entry from *Wikipedia*, which is a dynamic website built upon the input of millions of users; and second, I look at *CNN.com*, a site whose pages are customized based upon the cookie profile of each visitor, confronting its users with personalized ads and other unique temptations. With these examples I demonstrate how the rhetorical structure of the Web functions to keep audiences engaged in localized practices, encouraging them to abide by flows of semantic and pragmatic consistency rather than wandering nomadically from one random site or activity to the next. In conclusion I argue that as digital technologies provide new means for tempting us with surveillance-based personalization and advertising, scholars should be critical of the possibilities and possible selves crafted by this rhetoric (Vaidhyanathan 82–114).

### Flow on the Web?

In his 1974 classic *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams described “flow” as the way in which broadcast television programming was designed to keep customers tuned into extended viewing sequences. Anyone hoping to apply the concept of flow to different media contexts, therefore, should be mindful of the specificity of Williams’s project. Yet, as media critic John Fiske has pointed out, Williams’s notion of flow is characterized by fragmentation and discontinuity, elements that make flow especially suitable for the analysis of online HCI. Fiske explains that “flow, with its connotations of a languid river, is perhaps an unfortunate metaphor: the movement of the television text is discontinuous, interrupted, and segmented” (231)—not unlike, I might add, the media experience encouraged by the World Wide Web. Keeping this in mind, there is value in developing a cautious and realistic revision of Williams’s classic concept, highlighting its emphasis on a medium’s loose yet persistent grip on the audience. The Web’s hyperlinks entice and engage audiences, keeping us online by, in the prophetic words of Williams, offering “the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay” (95). Web texts, by giving their audiences a prodding glimpse toward what may come, engender an actively emergent Web experience that is always flowing toward the possible.

Williams describes how, in traditional broadcast television, “the characteristic organization, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form” (86). This differed from earlier media technologies because, in the past

[a] book or pamphlet was taken and read as a specific item. A meeting occurred at a particular date and place. A play was performed in a particular theatre at a set hour. The difference in broadcasting is not only that these events, or events resembling them, are available inside the home, by the operation of a switch. It is that the real programme that is offered is a *sequence* or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation. (86–87)

For Williams flow unifies and organizes discrete yet related textual units into a coherent sequence. Commercials, for example, are integrated into television shows in such a way that they appear not to interrupt them but to coalesce with them in a planned “flow”—similar settings, moods, actors, and products will appear during shows and their commercials, easing the transition between the different elements viewed by an audience. This sequential flow therefore overrides the individual unit—that is, the single show—as the organizational scheme of broadcast television. The compelling flow between a show, its commercials, and the programs that precede and follow it thus comprises the palpable unit of broadcast television. Williams argues:

It is evident that what is now called “an evening’s viewing” is in some ways planned, by providers and then by viewers, *as a whole*; that it is in any event planned in discernible sequences which in this sense override particular program units. Whenever there is competition between television channels, this becomes a matter of conscious concern: to get viewers in at the beginning of a flow. Thus in Britain there is intense competition between BBC and IBA in the early evening programmes, in the belief . . . that viewers will stay with whatever channel they begin watching. (93–94)

The commercial interests of television networks compel them to generate a flow of content that carries their customers through hours of viewing. Writers produce shows that are easily dividable into acts; between these acts commercials pull the viewer deeper into the streaming flow of content, their interruptive potential softened by the adoption of familiar or provocative themes, voices, or products. The resulting experience, as Williams points out, is that “many of us find television very difficult to switch off; that again and again, even when we have switched on for a particular ‘programme,’ we find ourselves watching the one after it and the one after that. . . . We can be ‘into’ something else before we have summoned the energy to get out of the chair” (94–95). This broadcast flow is designed to keep us

in our chairs, show after show, hour after hour; it is the elusive inertia that keeps us plugged into a particular media experience.

As most of us can attest, the Web generates a similar flowing momentum of activities and text consumption (see Petersen; Shaner). Bouncing from one site, profile, or activity to the next, users routinely find themselves in unexpected places, spending much more time on the Web than they had initially planned. Just as Williams showed that the individual television show is integrated into a larger stream of coherent content, the individual website is obviously not the consumptive unit of the Web experience. Rather, links encourage new consistencies of consumption, new flows by which Web users are encouraged to pursue other websites and other portals on existing pages. This is often accomplished by the linking of different texts or textual elements that are related by semantic and/or pragmatic theme to the site at hand. For example, users viewing an article on *Anti-War.com* or *CounterPunch.org* will typically be “offered” via hyperlink many other websites semantically related to American politics and foreign policy; and, of course, audiences will be presented with advertisements that are customized for these sites’ characteristically pro peace audiences. On sites such as Facebook, users will be encouraged to abide a semantic flow through the profiles of their unique “friends” and others who report similar interests where they might insert comments or leave feedback before being pulled to another profile or website. As this last example suggests, hyperlinks also organize users’ browsing practices around general pragmatic goals: a news consumer, for instance, is not only presented with links to material that is semantically consistent with the topic at hand, but he or she is also offered possibilities that encourage the continuation of the general pragmatic activity of news browsing. Links to other news stories fill the pages of websites such as *CNN.com* and *FoxNews.com*, encouraging users to abide a pragmatic flow of news consumption; and this is even more pronounced now that many websites, including *CNN.com* and *FoxNews.com*, personalize each page that a user accesses, tempting users with advertisements and customized links based upon a cookie-generated profile of his or her estimated interests (see O’Reilly 24–26). While not preordained by the television programmers described by Williams, these multi-textual flows make the Web a media platform that, like the television during a well-planned evening of programming, is often very difficult to walk away from.

Yet the flow of online HCI is uniquely rhetorical in that, unlike broadcast television, it must engage the cognitive and physical energies of users in order to capture them in a cyclical, procedural flow of text consumption. As users access online spaces—whether those spaces are traditional webpages or more interactive sites like Facebook—they are confronted with alluring options that have been carefully constructed by designers and/or generated automatically based upon users’ past activity profiles. This highly structured environment calls for us to

complement our traditional textual notions of rhetoric with a better understanding of how we are uniquely constrained and engaged by digital technologies. Hence we might follow Ian Bogost in focusing on the distinctive capacities of digital media to capture their users in processes of “procedural” identification. In the case of the World Wide Web, users are continuously surrounded by textual possibilities that are customized to generate procedural flows, promote continuity of text consumption, and prevent a randomized, arhetorical media experience. By the rhetorical constraints of the Web—especially its procedural bias toward evolving, multitextual activity sessions—liberated yet profoundly constrained audiences are channeled through a networked flow of texts, producing an experience that they, as Bogost might say, “feel compelled to continue” (47).

### Rhetoric and Digital Audiencing

Audience, of course, has long been a central concern of Western rhetorical theory. It was certainly important to Aristotle, who in the *Rhetoric* derives the three rhetorical species (epideictic, forensic, and deliberative) from audience types. But when Aristotle taught that it is necessary for an audience member “to be either an observer [*theoros*] or a judge [*krites*], and [in the latter case] a judge of either past or future happenings,” his more or less “linear” model of rhetor-audience interface clearly did not anticipate the complexities of online HCI (1358b).<sup>4</sup> Calling for a reevaluation of Aristotle’s neat division of rhetor and audience, Robert R. Johnson and others have pointed out that digital textuality has given twenty-first-century audiences an unprecedented role in sequencing and even producing the texts they consume (34–40; see also Brooke 62). A recurrent aim of scholarship in digital rhetoric, then, has been to reprioritize the components of the rhetor-audience-text triad, emphasizing the increasing importance of audience in the digital age (34–40; see also Warnick 122). These insights into the digital audience, I argue, can be best appreciated if viewed within a framework of struggle between the newly “liberated” audience and the procedural constraints of the Web. In this section of the article, I will explore the importance of this struggle, focusing especially on how Web texts productively constrain users’ “audiencing,” or the activities through which they become active participants in their media experience (Fiske, “Audiencing”). These constraints challenge the popular view that Web texts have radically decentralized our experience of textuality in the digital age. Instead they show how Web audiencing is governed by flows through which the organizing logics of more traditional texts—such as coherence of theme and momentum of access—are remediated into the Web experience, just as they were remediated from print media into relatively fragmented television broadcasting (see Bolter and Grusin).

Yet in the tumult and excitement of the digital age, the autonomy of the digital audience has been frequently overestimated, contributing to what Lev Manovich calls “the myth of the digital” (68–70). Many scholars have painted a mythologized portrait of human-web interface, conjuring ideals of unconstrained, irrational audiences that randomly bounce throughout a mediated space that seems to have forsaken all remnants of earlier textualities. At the core of this mythology is an antirhetorical conception of online HCI that is bolstered by claims of total “liberation,” “decentralization,” and “nonlinearity.” Douglas Allford and Norbert Pachler, for example, have contended that hyperlinks encourage “lateral connections between related and unrelated documents. . . . Nonlinearity constitutes a considerable break with the traditional linear nature of information presentation and can lead to considerable fragmentation” (215). Allford and Pachler assert that digital textuality is characterized by “broken” sequentiality, nonlinearity, and its facilitation of lateral connections between “unrelated” texts—that is, that it is inherently resistant to flow and cohesion. In a similar fashion, George P. Landow has speculated about what he calls the “hypertextual dissolution of centrality” (123), while others—including Ted Nelson, who coined the term *hypertext*—have gone so far as to claim that hyperlinks make texts “nonsequential” (Nelson; see also Hafner and Jones 35–48; Wood and Smith 42; emphasis added). Only without an appreciation of multitextual flow—one that acknowledges the rational and experiential cohesion that unites different texts and textual practices in discrete, *sequential* activity sessions—can digital textuality be considered so radically disruptive. Romanticizing the supposedly “linear” sequentiality of earlier media experiences *and* ignoring the central constraints of online HCI, these scholars posit chaos in the absence of the rhetor’s secure jurisdiction over the audience experience. However, the digital age’s constrained liberation of the audience requires that we become more sensitive to the ways in which digital texts, rather than enclosing users in a unified technological product, encourage them to construct a rhetorically informed, multitextual flow.

Annamaria Carusi has cautioned that “the readers’ ability to select a connection may give them a false sense of power over the text: links are put there by people, and are fully as significant and potentially as manipulative as other textual means” (176–77). I would like to add that in the Web 2.0 era, of course, the ways in which users can edit/produce texts—and, moreover, the texts that users are presented with and are thus encouraged to edit/produce—are similarly constrained in ways that keep them immersed in a textual experience. As Carusi points out, Landow’s somewhat enchanted notion of the “hypertextual dissolution of centrality” fails to acknowledge the remediated textual constraints that have been preserved in the evolving electronic age. Although digital rhetoric opens up new possibilities for diffuse polytextuality and audience interaction, its advances



are nevertheless carried out within a highly structured media platform that has simply reinvented the participatory and organizational logics of legacy media. In the words of Steven Johnson, “a link is a way of drawing connections between things. . . . This seems self-evident enough, and yet for some reason the critical response to hypertext prose has always fixated on the *dissociative* power of the link” (111). There is nothing at all “random” about Web audiencing, Johnson insists: “What makes the online world so revolutionary is the fact that there *are* connections between each stop on a [W]eb itinerant’s journey. The links that join those various destinations are links of association, not randomness” (109; emphasis added). In the days of digital audiencing, strolling from one activity to the next is simply a new way to turn the page (see Barker 174).

### The Web’s Rhetoric of the Possible

Because of the basic dynamism of Web audiencing, the analysis of online HCI calls for a theoretical framework that addresses the rhetorical means by which users are compelled to navigate between multiple texts and media formats. A specifically *digital* theory of online HCI, consequently, should take into account this fundamental potentiality and the audience liberation that makes it operable; otherwise, as Richard Lanham implicitly warns, we risk serving up a rehashed theory of the digitized book rather than original, compelling notions of digital rhetoric (*Economics* 131–32). Thus focusing exclusively on the traditional rhetoricality of digital texts—that is, analyzing them as individual multimodal texts divorced from their implied placement within a system of structured possibilities—prevents one from fully appreciating the constitutive agencies of the Web audience and the rhetoric of online HCI that affects its liberation.

Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology of *Da-sein* (human existence, or literally “there-being”) provides ground for a theory of digital rhetoric rooted in this dynamic system of structured possibilities. For Heidegger the existence of *Da-sein* is never stably present, never static or actualized; in his words, *Da-sein* is always “ahead-of-itself” (*Being and Time* 200), always coming into being. *Da-sein*’s immersion in the “not-yet,” then, is like the unripe fruit that “moves toward its ripeness. . . . The not-yet is already included in its own being, by no means as an arbitrary determination, but as a constituent. Correspondingly, *Da-sein*, too, *is always already its not-yet* as long as it is” (226–27). The fundamental characteristic of *Da-sein* is its constitutive possibility. A rhetorical analytic informed by this dynamic ontology, then, will remain mindful of the ripening, multitextual experience that is encouraged by the persistent rhetorical pressures of hyperlinks. Accordingly, Heidegger invites us to view the flows of

online HCI, like living experience in general, as “constituting the transition of the continuum, and not as pieces present alongside one another each for itself” (“The Fundamental Ontological Question” 249). Individual webpages or isolated audiencing activities, if viewed as detached, actualized objects that exist “alongside one another each for itself,” are less indicative of online rhetorical practice than those that are understood to be mere elements implicated in a system of multitextual flows. A website—or more accurately, a series of accessed websites and Web activities—comes into its own among an emergent flow of other texts and other possibilities.

Drawing from similar concerns in Heidegger’s work, John Poulakos has described a “rhetoric of the possible” that is sensitive to this constitutive potentiality (“Rhetoric”). In his contrast of Sophistic and Aristotelian rhetorics, which he grounds in the Aristotelian dichotomy of *dynamis* and *energeia*, Poulakos aligns Sophistic rhetoric with *dynamis* (potentiality), defining it as “the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible” (“Toward” 36). As the rhetorical means by which possible trajectories of textual immersion are suggested, hyperlinks certainly arise in opportune moments to create multitextual environments out of individual webpages. In a description that anticipates the rhetorical innovations of online HCI, Poulakos argues that “evoking the possible challenges the one and advances the manifold; it rejects permanence and favors change; it privileges becoming over being” (“Toward” 44). Web rhetoric provides a portal to this textual manifold, asserting the possible and provoking an emergent media experience that overcomes the traditional bounds of sentence, paragraph, image, and (web)page. Thus the hyperlink is not merely a way to suggest “outside” sources—a way to “escape” the text at hand in favor of others—but is instead the rhetorical provocation by which one’s multitextual environment is constantly challenged and renegotiated.

Before looking at how two digital artifacts channel this rhetoric of the possible, I would like to highlight the obvious fact that audiences can disobey these rhetorical biases. Audiences can, and often do, bounce from one “unrelated” site to the next; they are certainly free to further explore topics that are not hyperlinked on the page at hand, and they can even browse Facebook profiles that evince no direct connection to themselves or their friends. But television consumers can also change the station during a commercial, resisting—or rather, rechanneling into new areas—the flow that emerged in their media experience. The fact that audiences are not locked down by a single rhetorical flow should not discourage us from exploring the various ways in which the Web functions to keep audiences absorbed in patterns of text consumption. On the Web, these flows are generated by an often staggering proliferation of links, nearly all of which are customized by a site’s specific content or, via data mining and personalization, by

the unique user. When inundated with these customized and contextually relevant temptations, users are constantly encouraged to engage in rational flows of Web activity (see Andrejevic, “The Work”).

To take an example of how the Web’s rhetoric of possibility entices users to flow through constrained webs of intertexts, I will analyze the rhetoric of *Wikipedia*, the world’s most popular and expansive online encyclopedia. According to *Alexa.com*’s web traffic ratings, *Wikipedia* is the sixth most popular website in the US, making it an especially attractive object for our analysis of everyday online audiencing practices. Furthermore, despite the fact that *Wikipedia* is a community-driven project with thousands of active contributors in dozens of languages, its remediated rhetorical structure functions to entice audiences with hints of the possible (see Bruns 103–12); the participatory audiencing that is *Wikipedia*’s condition of possibility hardly negates its rhetorical bias toward constrained flow. While any one of *Wikipedia*’s pages would provide an excellent example of how flow is encouraged through continuously linked assertions of semantic relevance, I have chosen to analyze its entry for the Cuban Revolution. This three-thousand-word entry has approximately 130 hyperlinks (the equivalent of approximately four hundred manuscript words), not including its accompanying charts, photograph captions, and timelines, all of which are also densely linked. Of these 130 hyperlinks, only fifteen are not overtly semantically related to the Cuban Revolution, yet even these terms all have some general significance to the matter at hand. (For example, these “unrelated” hyperlinked terms lead to entries for Mexico, John F. Kennedy, the Dominican Republic, firing squad, and Puerto Rico.) The entry is otherwise filled with linked terms that through assertions of obvious semantic relevance, encourage audiences to expand their text consumption and/or editing into a structured network of possibilities. To illustrate, the entry begins with this short, representative paragraph: “The Cuban Revolution was an armed revolt that led to the overthrow [sic] the dictator Fulgencio Batista of Cuba on January 1, 1959 by the 26th of July Movement led by Fidel Castro” (“The Cuban Revolution”). This tidy summary—which, as with most *Wikipedia* entries, provides a short synopsis of the topic at hand—is a microcosm of the brimming rhetoric of possibility found throughout *Wikipedia*. The topics made immediately available by hyperlink—the entries for Fulgencio Batista, Cuba, the 26th of July Movement, and Fidel Castro—establish a field of equally accessible potentialities that have a very clear semantic relevance to each other and to the node at which the user entered that textual environment (the “Cuban Revolution” entry). Let us say that a user chooses to follow the link to the “26th of July Movement” entry. He or she then reads several paragraphs before clicking on another hyperlink that appears intriguing, the entry for Che Guevara. On the “Che Guevara”

entry, this user is confronted with a similar deluge of semantically related, and thus presumably attractive, possibilities for further text consumption (Andrejevic, “The Work”).

This hypothetical scenario will be familiar to most Web users, who are accustomed to following the Web into unexpected places. Contrary to the worries (or excitement) of many critics, *Wikipedia* audiences are not presented with a random or infinite assemblage of possibilities; rather this site, like most Web texts, creates a differential distribution of the possible—a textual environment in which certain elements are privileged over their unlinked or uneditable counterparts—that defines the potential excursions of its “liberated” audience. Semantic themes self-actuate and morph during this process, piquing a user’s curiosity and luring him or her toward previously unexpected possibilities. Thus a user who begins by researching the Cuban Revolution might eventually find him or herself looking into the Cuban Missile Crisis, the city of Havana, or even personally editing an entry on the demographics of Puerto Rico; but the flow that brought this user there is rhetorically governed by the semantic biases of online rhetoric.

Web flows can also be defined by the temporary homogeneity of a user’s pragmatic motives. For example, a user who approaches *Wikipedia*’s Cuban Revolution entry with the intent of researching twentieth-century Latin America will find that these links address and mutually inform that motive. Yet this is perhaps most evident in other examples, such as when a user wants to check out the daily news. This general motive might lead a user to visit *CNN.com*, the headlined story of which now happens to be “Pope Rallies Christians not to Despair in Face of Attacks” (CNN Wire Staff). On the site dedicated to this news story, there are seventeen links immediately visible at the top of the page, all of which send users to general news categories (for example, “Business” and “Entertainment”) on *CNN.com*. Adjacent to the headline are two large, personalized “Google Ads.”<sup>567</sup> Next to these Google Ads are links to three other “related” *CNN.com* articles, all of which involve global Christian affairs and are thus semantically relevant to the article at hand. To the right of these links the main narrative begins; then, eighty-eight words into the story—the equivalent of three abrupt paragraphs—two more large, personalized Google Ads appear in the middle of the page. To the sides of these personalized Google Ads are two provocative, full-color ads for CNN’s “Impact the World” campaign, asking users to “Take Action”—the primary “action” they are soliciting, of course, is for users to click on the ads. Below and adjacent to these advertisements, the news narrative continues for 250 words. At the bottom of the page are three more personalized Google ads, below which lie links to six other *CNN.com* news stories and to six other websites from across the Internet. (Concerning these last six off-site webpages, *CNN.com* assures its audiences, “We do our best to ensure that all of the links recommended

to you lead to interesting content,” implying that these ads are also customized by either user-specific data or by some asserted semantic/pragmatic relevance to the particular site in which they are embedded.) *CNN.com*, like most sites on the Web, has a striking amount of ostensibly “peripheral” content that channels the potentiality of online HCI. Its conventional prose news narratives are made subordinate to the Web’s sprawling rhetorical imperatives, which are expressed in the site’s ubiquitous encouragement to stay on the move—to learn more about a current event, to leave a comment, or to buy something from a site’s commercial sponsors.

In the above examples, the Web’s rhetorical biases are expressed by the orientation of audiences toward logicized multitextual consumption. Web users are always inundated with a staggering number of “relevant” possibilities, a ubiquitous rhetoric of the possible that encourages them to expand and renegotiate their media experience (see Craig and Flood). These fulfilled possibilities cohere into the rhetorical flows by which users are caught in unexpected patterns of participation, engaging issues, researching products, and exploring topics that while not preordained have been offered to them through a digital rhetoric that is heavily biased toward keeping its users connected to the Web. As is perhaps most evident in the personalization of *CNN.com*, the defining innovations of Web 2.0 technology only exacerbate this phenomenon, generating what Mark Andrejevic calls a “digital enclosure”: a virtual space in which this rhetoric of the possible surrounds users with customized possibilities for participatory audiencing (*iSpy* 2–4).

### Conclusion: Out of Chaos, Flow

At the dawn of the digital age, Richard Lanham attempted to carve out a space for digital rhetoric by emphasizing the continuous and productive interactivity that has come to characterize new media textuality. Embracing Lanham’s classic call to address the “chaos” of digital interactivity (*Electronic Word* 61), I would like to supplement his remarks by stressing that this digital chaos has become the condition of possibility for new systems of rhetorical constraints. Despite the Web’s chaotic facade, these constraints govern the liberated audience through flows of online activities. The centrality of this flowing rhetoric complicates the popular, antirhetorical notion of the Web as an inherently decentralized, liberatory, and randomizing media platform. Although such utopian visions of “the electronic sublime” have begun to fade somewhat in recent years, the complicity of rhetoric in the constricting rationalization of the Web experience deserves further attention (Carey 442).

The Web's rhetoric of the possible can serve a number of more or less constructive functions: For one, many news readers appreciate having relevant news stories suggested to them, and many researchers will readily acknowledge that hyperlinks help them locate pertinent sources and generate new ideas. But as the *CNN.com* example shows, the rhetoric of online HCI also delimits our possibilities and stokes our curiosities in more pernicious ways. Just as we are constantly inundated with a barrage of advertisements on television and in "real" space, virtual space is crawling not only with ads but also with new ways to monitor, scrutinize, and predict our behavior. Virtually every move we make on the Web is being captured and analyzed by strategists who are designing ever more refined ways to govern our lives on and offline (see Pariser). On the Web "the possible" that is conjured is often a possible self, one with a new pair of shoes, whiter teeth, faster Internet service, or a cheaper car insurance bill. But the problem of advertising, of course, is only one (especially visible) aspect of the larger issue at hand: that our online audiencing is rhetorically governed to encourage participatory flows of media consumption. If we recall Steven Johnson's warning, randomness and decentralization have never characterized online HCI. Rather, Web audiences are channeled through rational flows of text consumption and other online activities. While I do not share some critics' anxiety over the polarizing ideological "echo chambers" engendered by this aspect of the Web (for example, see Cass Sunstein), I think their analysis has seized upon an important point: Not only does online HCI reproduce media consumption habits, but it also facilitates insulated exposure to recurrent content.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not this is a new phenomenon, as Sunstein contends, is debatable; yet, as explored in this essay, the semantic-pragmatic consistencies promoted by the Web's rhetoric of the possible help ensure that something of a factual "echo chamber" is built into online audiencing.

By positing an ideal audience that is insensitive to the rhetorical constraints of new media textuality—as have many critics—we risk overlooking how the Web maintains a loose but persistent grip on its audiences. Yet we focus on the rhetorical dimensions of Web technologies (for example, linking) rather than on the instrumental rhetoric of autonomous digital texts, we can better describe what is uniquely rhetorical about being-on-the-Web. Whereas broadcast flow was generated in order to disengage audiences—that is, to keep them from changing the channel—the formal flow of the Web is designed to entice and actively engage audiences, tempting us with "the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay" (Williams 95). By giving audiences a prodding glimpse toward what may come, this rhetoric encourages an emergent, multitextual experience that is always flowing toward the possible. Because the Web—just like television before it—is a media platform with which advertisers, campaign managers, and others

continuously remake the future, it is our job as critics to be vigilant about the tempting possibilities crafted by this rhetoric online.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I thank Pat Arneson, Ashley Kelly, Carolyn Miller, David Rieder, Jeff Swift, and Kenneth Zagacki for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I am especially grateful for the careful, patient assistance of *RR* editor Theresa Enos and reviewers Barbara Warnick and James Zappen.

<sup>2</sup>Warnick and Heineman distinguish between user-to-document interactivity, user-to-system interactivity, and user-to-user activity (55–56; see also Warnick 69–90). While my analysis will focus mainly on the rhetorical constraints of user-to-document interactivity, these other modes of interactivity offer productive scenes for the future analysis of flow and digital rhetoric (see endnote 7 of this essay).

<sup>3</sup>Since the mid 2000s, there has been much discussion of the technical innovations presented by Web 2.0; and now, of course, we are beginning to hear about the emergence of Web 3.0. The term *Web 2.0* was coined by business professionals discussing the collapse of the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s. Many of the Web companies that survived the collapse, they concluded, shared certain features: they offered unprecedented levels of interactivity, social networking, and user control, relying on user- and database-driven applications and “collective intelligence” rather than HTML and rigid software (O’Reilly). In the words of Paul Anderson, Web 2.0 is “a more socially connected Web in which people can contribute as much as they consume” (4). So while it is essential to consider personalization and interactivity when theorizing web activities, the extent of the “Web 2.0 revolution,” just like the extent of the original Web revolution, can lead one to overlook the structured rhetoricality of the Web (Keen).

<sup>4</sup>While characterizing Aristotelian rhetoric as “linear” is somewhat reductive, it does satisfactorily capture the contrast between textuality as articulated by an individual rhetor, on the one hand, and digital textuality as emerging uniquely in a user’s audiencing practices, on the other.

<sup>5</sup>As Warnick notes, this capacity for coproduction is a key dimension of digital rhetoric: “[U]sers become active cocreators of messages when they customize site content . . . or post messages and photos that become part of the Web site text. . . . By involving users in posting and reading user-contributed content, [web]sites can promote [user] identification” (76, 89). Like many websites, then, *Wikipedia* offers users several different avenues for identification, and hence their capacity for flow extends beyond my focus on user-to-document interactivity.

<sup>6</sup>In my case, there is an ad for car insurance and an ad for an online university. It is important to note that Google’s advertising website uses this sales pitch to potential customers: “Earn more money by showing ads that relate to your content and users” (Google Ads). This personalization, according to O’Reilly (19–25), is one of the signature features of Web 2.0; for Eli Pariser, it is one of the emerging Web’s greatest dangers (47–75).

<sup>7</sup>We might consider, for example, how Web browsers like Safari and Firefox recall users’ previous Web activities. These browsers’ address bars confront users with hyperlinks to their most frequently visited sites, ensuring that even when users are not enticed by the links on a particular webpage, they are presented with a pull-down list of “favorite” and frequently visited sites. While offering users a detour from the semantic-pragmatic flow at hand, these features offer different “channels” on which new flows, initiated by the hyperlinks offered on these and subsequent sites, can arise. This example is more representative of what Warnick and Heineman call “user-to-system” interactivity (see endnote 2 of this essay).

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