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The Commenting Persona: Reception Theory and the Digital Rhetorical Audience

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Abstract. *This article explores the implications of integrating a reception-based approach to audience studies into the current conception of the rhetorical audience. It asserts that by tracing the contours of online audience response to a rhetorical text, a “commenting persona” emerges that can speak on behalf of the text’s actual audience. This commenting persona, then, fills a gap in the popular “persona” theory of the rhetorical audience by locating a persona that resides outside of the rhetorical text, rather than being a projection created within the text. The article hopes to provide a theoretical framework for rhetorical scholars to integrate reception theory into their analysis of the after-life of rhetorical text and the response by the actual audiences that consume them.*

Keywords: *Digital Audience; Reception Studies; Rhetoric; New Media; Online Persona.*

Introduction

On January 21, 2017, one day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, hundreds of thousands of women and men flooded the Washington D.C. Mall for the Women's March on Washington (Przybyla & Schouten 2017). An estimated 2.6 million people participated in the Women's March worldwide, and the event was called "the largest single-day demonstration recorded in U.S. History" (Chenoweth & Pressman 2017). Though the Women's March claimed to represent "all women," conversations surrounding the event on social media made it clear that the message of the march was not received positively by everyone. This was evidenced through the trending hashtag #notmymarch, and thousands of comments on social media platforms disparaging the march.

The Women's March's troubled after life on the internet is evidence of a larger trend of the power of digital audiences to change the original narrative of a text through comments and conversation. For the field of rhetorical studies, the importance of grappling with audience reception of rhetorical texts in the digital age cannot be overstated. Audience has historically been a complicated topic in rhetorical theory because there is a gap between the projected audience (the audience that the speaker or text *wants* their message to be received by) and the actual audience (the people who consume the message, whether or not they were the intended audience of the rhetor). Technological advances such as the internet, smartphones, and social media have increased the potential for misalignments between the projected and actual audience due to audience fragmentation, the increased shareability of content, and the globalization of information (Webster & Ksiazek 2012).

Despite this complication of traditional conceptions of the rhetorical audience, the digital age holds promise for contributing to and creating new rhetorical theories (Zappen 2005). Zappen says "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 the new digital media" (Zappen 2005). A reexamination of traditional rhetorical practices suggests that the actual rhetorical audience might be studied and heard in a way that it wasn't before. Though rhetorical audiences on digital platforms are physically separated from the rhetors who address them, emerging technologies allow audience members to converse with the rhetor and each other by commenting on articles, sending messages, writing open letters, and simply sharing content on social media. This gives the rhetorical audience more autonomy and control over rhetorical discourses.

Following in the footsteps of Edwin Black's *the Second Persona* and various other scholars who have developed interpretations of personas constructed in rhe-

torical artifacts, this essay posits a new kind of persona which I have termed the “commenting persona.” The commenting persona is found outside of the rhetorical text and instead lies within the audience itself, giving the audience a voice and identity that should not be ignored by the rhetorical analyst. This notion of audience is unlike previous treatments of persona which have attended in detail to the projected audience. Instead, my project seeks to bridge the gap between the projected and actual audience by creating a model of study for audience reception of rhetorical messages and subsequent interaction with the projected audience.

To do this, I will first give a brief history of conceptions of audience in rhetorical theory, I will define the characteristics of a rhetorical persona in existing scholarship, I will introduce the theory of reception studies, and finally I will tie these concepts together to formulate my model of the commenting persona using the comments and conversation surrounding the Women’s March as a case study. The theoretical intervention that this paper seeks to make is to challenge existing conceptions of rhetorical persona by defining a persona that speaks for itself rather than is just constructed for and by the rhetor. I argue that thinking of the rhetorical audience in this way increases the autonomy of the actual audience while helping rhetorical critics make more realistic conjectures of meaning on behalf of the projected audience.

Theoretical Framework

A Selective History of Audience in Rhetoric

When looking at the history of audience in rhetorical studies, one might first look at Aristotle’s treatment of audience. Aristotle’s historically situated construction of audience is best understood through speech situations in which the audience was physically present in front of the orator (Clayton 2004). Aristotle was a strong proponent of tailoring a rhetorical message to be best understood by, and therefore to best persuade, an audience (Clayton 2004). In his work, *Rhetoric*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of understanding your audience by saying, “people always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character: and we can now see how to compose our speeches so as to adapt both them and ourselves to our audiences,” (Aristotle, n.d.). However, though Aristotle privileged the audience’s opinion in the crafting of a rhetorical message, the audience he conceived was a passive one, able only to accept or reject the speakers position without being given a space to respond back to the rhetor (Porter 1992).

This model of the rhetorical audience as an acted upon agent, one which receives messages directly as they were intended, was persistent in much of classical rhetoric (Porter 1992). Notable philosophers, such as Cicero, continued this transmission model of rhetorical message, affording the audience little power over their ability to interpret messages. Kenneth Burke reaffirms this notion by saying

“both Aristotle and Cicero consider audience purely as something given” (Burke 1969). However, like Aristotle, most classical rhetorical scholars imagined the audience purely in a speech situation rather than an audience distanced by written rhetorical messages.

By the 20th century, rhetorical studies had moved focus from purely speech situations to include rhetorical messages in written texts (Porter 1992). Along with this refocusing came a shift in the formulation of audience. The study of written rhetoric brought a notable distance between the rhetor and the audience. No longer was the audience a visible and present component of a rhetorical situation, but instead the audience could primarily be found within the text itself. This line of study focused more on the rhetorical “moves” made by the rhetorician, making the audience of less importance than the textual tools employed (Porter 1992). Porter goes as far as to say that scholars during this era removed the audience completely from rhetorical studies. He says, “thanks to a series of epistemological shifts at several key moments in rhetorical history (classical rhetoric, eighteenth-century new rhetoric, twentieth-century current-traditionalism), the audience effectively disappears” (Porter 1992).

The role of the audience in rhetorical studies went through somewhat of a revival with Bitzer’s famous essay, *The Rhetorical Situation*. In his essay, Bitzer reconstitutes the audience as an essential part of any rhetorical situation. For Bitzer, a rhetorical audience does not simply refer to those individuals who receive a rhetorical message, but instead “a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer, 1968). Though Bitzer still constructs the audience in a passive manner, the contribution he makes in reinstating the audience in rhetorical studies is an important one. The study of audience also began to be revisited in literary scholarship. Wilson popularized a multi-faceted approach to audience, or “the reader,” by positing that for each text, there is a “real reader,” an “implied reader,” and a “characterized reader” (Wilson 1981). The real reader, by his view, is somewhat unattainable and similar to a fiction, the characterized reader is the one referred to by the author through the text, and the implied reader is the behavior, attitudes, and background – “presupposed or defined, usually indirectly, in the text itself-necessary for a proper understanding of the text” (Wilson 1981).

The brief and incomplete history that I have just offered serves to identify several important themes in the development of the rhetorical audience. The first is the recurring notion of the audience as a passive entity able to be acted upon by the rhetorician. This enduring conception justifies a study of rhetoric in which each message is received exactly in the way the rhetor intended. Secondly, there is a marked difference between the treatment of an audience in a speech situation and a written situation. In a speech situation, the audience is tangible and crucial,

and the goal is to affect change on the audience through persuasion. In the study of written rhetoric, however, the audience becomes less present and less well-defined, and can be identified through careful attention to the second persona. Finally, the role of the audience in shifting and influencing the creation of rhetorical messages has been underexplored thus far in the field.

Rhetorical Audience and a Fractured Paradigm

At the core of rhetorical theory's audience problem is a paradigmatic difference between scholars who believe that the projected audience, contained within the rhetorical text, is sufficient to make conjectures of meaning, and those who believe that to make claims of meaning, one must understand the dynamics of the real audience outside the text. The former scholar would likely be more concerned with developing and perfecting arguments, while the latter would be concerned with enacting social change in the physical world. These two positions are difficult to rectify because they embody two vastly different approaches to rhetorical studies. I will attempt to explain how both positions have manifested themselves in rhetorical study.

The concept of audience research was introduced into the field of rhetorical criticism in the late 20th century. Audience research, for the purpose of this essay, refers to any empirical study of audience behavior or response within the frame of a given text or discourse (Livingstone, 1998). A move towards audience studies, according to Livingstone, has been important for fields such as cultural and media studies. She says, "the audience has become *visible*, theoretically, empirically, and politically having previously been marginalized and devalued within media theory" (Livingstone 1998). Stromer-Galley and Schiappa note that integrating audience studies would not only be beneficial for rhetorical theory, but would correct the problem of unfounded audience conjectures made within rhetorical texts (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa 1998).

According to Stromer-Galley and Schiappa, the use of audience studies is not necessary if a rhetorical critic assumes two things; "first, that all mass-mediated messages have universal deterministic effects on audiences; second, that each popular culture text has one unequivocal meaning" (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa 1998). There are few scholars in the present day who would argue that these two conditions are always true of any text. Audience research has been deemed problematic because it no longer relies on the text and is "overly-media centric" (Livingstone 1998). According to Livingstone, "audience research is losing its direction because, through an internal narrative of progress, a canonical version of audience studies is being constructed... overviews of the field seem to slip between talking of audience studies and cultural studies as if the former now subsumes the latter" (Livingstone 1998). Allor agrees with this notion and posits that the actual

audience can never be truly understood because audience itself is a “theoretical construct” (Allor 1988). Thus, to those who dissent to empirical audience studies, no measure can accurately capture what a real audience is.

When the actual audience is not accounted for in rhetorical studies, the projected audience takes its place. The projected audience is significant because it generally has a very tenuous relationship with the actual audience, and instead addresses an imagined audience “to create a message that accounts for the character of a specific group of people who are imagined as the receivers of that message” (Porrovecchio & Condit 2016). A rhetorical text is always structured in relationship to this projected audience, or persona. One of the first, and most highly cited, conceptions of the projected audience is Black’s *The Second Persona*. In his essay, Black posits that “the critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become” (Black 1970). In response to Black, Wander created his theory of *The Third Persona*, which points out that by projecting an implied audience as the addressed persona, the rhetor inevitably projects another persona onto the text - the one which the text “leaves out” (Wander 1984).

The commenting persona that I posit in this project, which theorizes the way in which actual consumers of a rhetorical message make their “voices” through the ability to comment on a rhetorical text through social media may seem out of place in the discourse of the rhetorical persona. For one, the commenting persona steps outside of the rhetorical text and instead focuses on discourse created by the consumers of the text. And secondly, the commenting persona seems to imply a “realness” that cannot be afforded to other versions of the persona which project a rhetor’s desired audience. In reality, the commenting persona is not synonymous with the actual audience. This is because an actual audience, especially in a highly fragmented digital world, is almost impossible to define and does not represent a cohesive whole (Cover 2006). Instead, digital audiences are made up of opinionated individuals, online communities, and response forums. Because of this, the commenting persona is just that; a persona. Anyone who tries to employ the commenting persona in rhetorical criticism will inevitably engage in a selection process of identifying only a facet of audience response. Thus, instead of engaging an absolute, total, “real audience,” the commenting persona adds another layer of meaning onto a rhetorical text by exploring the audience discourses surrounding it. Analyses of the commenting persona must necessarily step outside of the text to examine how the text has evolved through interaction with its commentators.

Characteristics of the Rhetorical Persona

To develop a theory of a commenting persona, it is first imperative to understand the characteristics of a rhetorical persona by examining treatments of persona thus far in rhetorical scholarship. As stated above, the rhetorical persona is

typically associated with a projected audience that “accounts for the character of a specific group of people who are imagined as the receivers of that message,” (Porrovecchio & Condit 2016). In the time since Black’s famous essay, *The Second Persona*, several scholars have added to the theory of rhetorical persona, fundamentally changing and challenging the concept that a persona is simply a projection of the intended audience of a speaker. I will now attempt to trace out these changes to the rhetorical persona and determine the essential elements necessary to define a persona.

Black asserts that in order to pass moral judgments on a discourse, one must humanize the discourse because “we are accustomed to thinking of discourses as objects, and we are not equipped to render moral judgments of objects” (Black 1970). This logic was the point of inception for theorizing the second persona; if one can locate within the text the audience that the rhetor would have its actual audience become, then one can pass moral judgments on that persona rather than on the discourse itself. As stated earlier in this essay, Black’s second persona is definitively and necessarily different than the actual audience (as I have defined it) because it represents an ideal audience that accepts the invitation to “become” the type of subject that best serves the rhetor’s projected community. Wander, in *The Third Persona*, moves past this idealized version of rhetorical persona and suggests that thinking of audience in terms of the second persona totalizes the addressed subjects and ignores an audience that is simultaneously negated as soon as the projected audience is invoked (Wander 1984).

Though Black’s version of the rhetorical persona has no contact with the actual audience outside of the text, Wander asserts that the third persona needs to be located “in relation to actual audiences and in relation to a first and second persona” (Wander 1984). This means that the negated third persona cannot be constructed without both the presence of the previous two personas and the historical and social structures existing *outside* of the text that point to why a particular audience was left out. In her conception of the “null persona,” a persona which adopts a rhetorical strategy of silence for self-preservation, Cloud argues that studying this audience also necessitates attention to “extradiscursive features of social power,” suggesting a type of rhetorical persona which can no longer be located through attention to an isolated text (Cloud 1999).

Morris offers a take on rhetorical persona in which “audiences are implicated in the construction of first personas – ones that avoid calling out those whose rhetoric belies the truth of their personhood” (Porrovecchio & Condit 2016). This manifests itself in what Morris calls the “textual wink” which is only perceptible by those who share in the pursuit of passing, and are thus “abettors” to the first persona (Morris 2002). Like the third persona and the null persona, the fourth persona is made present in its invisibility, and is only “real” for those who can

recognize and interpret the wink. This treatment of persona posits that there is a mutual dependency between the speaker and the persona – both exist to validate each other.

Tracing the trajectory of the rhetorical persona highlights several themes or characteristics that underlie each unique treatment. First, each persona must have a “who” and a “where.” The “who” refers to the personality of the persona. Though each treatment of persona suggests a different personality, all theorizations of persona thus far have assumed that a persona is cohesive and works toward the same end, making it possible to identify the distinct personality of the persona. Rather than being a scattering of isolated voices, the persona stands united and moves in the same direction, whether that unity is moving towards what the rhetor would have the persona become, or is simply a collective silence through negation or choice.

The “where” refers to the location that the persona occupies in relation to the text. Black’s second persona, for instance, resides solely in the text being analyzed. It is embedded into the rhetorical choices made by the speaker, and thus cannot be located outside of the text. The third persona can only be located through a gap in the text and in the ideological assumptions that exist in conversations outside of the text from which the third persona is excluded. For Cloud, the null persona can never be located in textual manifestations, and can only be located through silence. In each instance, the rhetorical persona must be “found” even if it is defined as being invisible or silent. The consistent reference to the “extradiscursive” properties of the rhetorical persona throughout its various manifestations suggests a desire by scholars who theorize rhetorical persona to make some sort of contact with what they consider to be the “real” audience, or the tangible people living their lives outside of the text.

In the evolutionary process of the rhetorical persona, there has been a tendency for the persona to slip evermore into invisibility. As theories of persona move beyond the second persona, these personas become marked only by their absence from discourse, their strategic silence, or through the unspoken “wink.” Even Black’s second persona is never afforded a voice of its own, but is rather a projection of the desires of the speaker. Rhetorical personas, as they are theorized now, do not speak. Adding the commenting persona to the cannon of rhetorical personas would fundamentally change this notion, necessitating a reevaluation of a few abiding principles of the rhetorical persona.

First, the commenting persona would perhaps get closer than any other theory of persona thus far to the coveted concept of the “real” audience. By being structured around comments made by actual audience members, or those tangible human beings who can respond and give opinions on the texts they consume, the commenting persona attends to the processes by which audience members make sense of and identify with rhetorical texts, and thus inscribe their own meaning

onto the text. Because of its proximity to the actual audience, the commenting persona must also deal with the challenges associated with the amorphous nature of the actual audience. As such, the commenting persona will have to account for the fact that a “real” audience, or the sum of the individual people who consume a media text, will never represent consensus. Thus the “who” of the commenting persona will not embody the cohesion that previous rhetorical personas so readily adopt. This is what makes defining the commenting persona particularly challenging; it must somehow fracture the cohesion that is represented in previous treatments of the persona without claiming to be wholly representative of the unattainable “real” audience.

A Reception-Based Approach to Audience

Reception studies may offer a way to flesh out the theory of the commenting persona in ways that previous treatments of rhetorical persona cannot. To develop a framework for identifying the commenting persona, I must first explain what is meant by reception studies. Reception theory draws its roots from cultural studies. According to Iversen, “reception analysis has its origins in reactions to traditional audience studies’ lack of focus on meaning construction, and certain perceived limitations concerning the methods that have hitherto been employed” (Iversen, 2015). Reception theory is distinct from traditional audience studies as employed in the social sciences. Beyond using empirical methods such as focus groups, and analysis of audience demographics, reception theory studies the contours of audience’s culturally situated responses to a discourse, and how this meaning works to shape and change the original discourse. Because of these factors, reception theory, rather than audience studies, may be a more palatable form of interaction with the actual audience for the rhetorical critic. The method for reception theory does not necessitate a scientific study, but instead allows the critic to listen to the opinions being disseminated by various members and facets of the actual audience.

It is evident that reception studies as a method of interacting with rhetorical texts has not been sufficiently explored in previous research. However, I am not the first to assert that integrating reception-based approaches into rhetorical studies would be beneficial to the field. Kjeldsen states that “new media and new forms of communication make it harder to distinguish between speaker and audience... from mostly understanding audiences as theoretical constructions that are examined textually and speculatively, we should give more attention to empirical explorations of actual audiences and users” (Kjeldsen 2016). This type of attention to the reception of rhetorical texts by members of the actual audience would emphasize rhetoric as a “process not a product” (Kjeldsen 2016). Kjeldsen provides one potential model for practically looking at audience reception through an example of a right-wing, Danish advertisement. Kjeldsen analyzed 80 newspaper articles that mentioned the ad and found that most of his sample did not agree with

the argument presented in the advertisement, and in fact “argued back” against the rhetorical message embedded in the advertisement (Kjeldsen 2016).

While Kjeldsen’s case study provides evidence that audiences do indeed resist and comment on rhetorical messages that are presented to them, I believe that there are opportunities to see even more unfiltered forms of reception through studying reception on social media rather than traditional news platforms. Social media research has grown exponentially in the 21st century, with most research centering around how social media audiences can be monetized (Evans 2010). Kaplan and Haenlein argue that social media has certain characteristics which make it distinct from any other technological advances which proceed it (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Some of the distinctiveness comes from the explosion of user generated content (UGC) on what is known as the Web 2.0, or the emergence of “blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). UGC on the web is characterized as such because it “needs to show a certain amount of creative effort” and “needs to have been created outside professional routines and practices” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are containers for UGC and constitute unique spaces in which users can comment on texts produced both through “professional routines and practices” and on content generated by fellow users. Thus, a project that attempts to define the commenting persona should look to social media platforms as the primary site for commenting interaction.

Though I cannot find an existing study that is a perfect model for locating the commenting persona through social media-based reception theory, the work of Carolina Acosta-Alzuru provides a strong basis for an integrated approach to rhetoric and reception theory. As a cultural media scholar, Acosta-Alzuru uses “the circuit of culture” as a methodology for her studies of Telenovelas. The circuit of culture studies how meaning is produced at every level of the message. Acosta-Alzuru says, “meaning is produced and negotiated in each of the circuit’s moments - production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. These meanings are necessary, but not sufficient, for determining the meanings embedded in other moments” (Acosta-Alzuru 2003). In many of her works, Acosta-Alzuru studies social media reactions to certain texts, as well as online fandom communities and their ability to inscribe additional meaning onto texts.

Elements of the circuit of culture model can be employed when developing the commenting persona. The commenting persona will be found through popular opinions and consensus manifested on social media and other digital forums, but it will also be found by tracing specific individual opinions that gain traction and become part of the larger conversation, influencing the opinions of others, and consequently, the initiating text itself. The commenting persona does not seek to destroy or delegitimize text-based rhetorical criticism, but rather would offer additional perspectives on text-making and circulation, and could serve to strengthen

or create additional arguments that wouldn't have been available through reading the text alone.

Defining the Commenting Persona

My theorization of the commenting persona seeks to marry the concepts of rhetorical persona and a reception-based approach to studying audience. This theorization of the commenting persona is a two-step process. The first step seeks to develop a version of a "persona" by identifying an organizing scheme of behaviors, purposes, and manifestations of the commenting persona in its various forms. The second step will take a broader look at the potential of the commenting persona in action and will develop a framework for incorporating the commenting persona into rhetorical criticism and scholarship. Though this essay seeks to provide a theoretical framework rather than studying a particular case in detail, I feel that it is necessary to refer to a practical example as I develop a theory. Therefore, my organizing example will center around social media responses to the Women's March on Washington D.C. in January of 2017.

Based on the characteristics of the rhetorical persona that I have outlined previously, each rhetorical persona must refer to a "who" and a "where." I will attend first to "where" the commenting persona is located. The commenting persona is located outside of the rhetorical text. It manifests itself in the realm of response, and thus is clustered around the rhetorical text but not within it. For the practical purposes of this essay, the commenting persona is most easily seen on social media platforms, where commenters have access to a wide array of rhetorical texts and other commenters while having unlimited opportunity to express their opinions. The "where" of the commenting persona is much different than previous treatments of persona which have been located in textual projections of audience by the speaker, and thus is a better reflection of an actual audience.

In the case of the commenting persona, the "who" is difficult to define. As I explained before, stating that there is in fact "a who" associated with each persona implies a level of cohesion and homogeneity that is not representative of the typical array of "commenters" on any given rhetorical text in a digital space. Trying to define the commenter based on the sum of its parts is an impossible task, as is always the case when one attempts to understand or bracket the actual audience. Thus, characterizing the commenting persona by its membership to a particular ideology or unique moral disposition is only productive when viewing a commenting persona that is somewhat unified in the personal investments of its discreet members. I seek to first develop a model of the commenting persona that is organized around its behavior, or potentialities for action, rather than a specific identificatory thread. The "who" of the commenting persona, therefore, refers to an archetype of commenting behaviors that are marked by their application across social differences and individualities of the actual audience.

The behaviors of the commenting persona manifest themselves in types of comments made, and in the interaction between individual commenters. By referring back to the guiding literature that I have outlined above, I posit that there are several types of comments that repeat themselves across subjects and commenters. As we have discussed, polysemy assures that there are dominant readings to each text, but reception studies asserts that meaning is made at the level of the individual (Condit 1989; Hall 1973). These statements, while true, each reveal something essential about the nature of responses associated with the commenting persona. First, the idea that there is a dominant reading to each text suggests that, when interacting with an online rhetorical text, a commenter will either identify with or distance themselves from that dominant reading. Second, if meaning is produced at the level of the individual, the commenter also has the potential to articulate the meaning the text has to themselves, thus adding a layer of meaning beyond the dominant reading.

Now, I will turn to my guiding example of responses to the Women's March to give examples of what some of the types of comments might look like. The Women's March is a particularly salient example of the commenting persona at work because it was a movement birthed on social media. According to the LA Times, a woman named Teresa Shook started the Women's March as a Facebook event (Agrawal 2017). The march soon gained traction, and an estimated 2.6 million people participated in the Women's March worldwide, and the event was called "the largest single-day demonstration recorded in U.S. History" (Chenoweth & Pressman 2017). Though the event had an enormous turn out, social media responses to the Women's March were predictably varied. A Facebook post by CNN politics on the day of the event shows just how varied the individual responses are, but also reveals a pattern of commenting behaviors through which the commenting persona begins to take shape. The post itself contains a video of a crowd funneling into a Metro station in Washington D.C., and the caption reads "video shows protestors packing into a suburban D.C. Metro station, bound for the #WomensMarch on Washington."

Immediately, statements of identification or distancing from the dominant textual reading jump from within the comment section of the post. A woman named Diane Strodel writes, "Beautiful! Supporting women's rights. Marching peacefully. Very proud!" while another woman named Fara Roe writes, "Another stupid, POINTLESS march, and a waste of police and tax payer money... Trump and Pence support women's rights and equal rights for all." These contributions by individual commenters represent a certain type of comment that I will call "identificatory stance-taking." Identificatory stance-taking firmly establishes the commenter on one side of a binary between agreeing with and accepting or disagreeing with and rejecting the perceived rhetorical argument of the text.

Beyond identificatory stance-taking, there is another type of comment that rises to the forefront, a comment which adds meaning beyond the text of the original post itself. For example, a man named Shawn Campbell writes, "Amazing how the medias manipulation of the truth influences so many people. Sad. And just to be clear all media outlets do it. The burden is on us to figure out if what we are being told is truth. Understand that the 'news' is really just the opinions of people hired to spin the facts to manipulate their viewers." Campbell's comment reveals his own process of meaning-making. Though the post itself only showed a video of the march with a short caption, Campbell asserted that the post was symptomatic of a corrupt media structure that operated outside of truth. This is an example of the type of comment that I will term "additional meaning attribution."

Along with these two types of comments, there are several other behaviors that characterize the commenting persona. One is a reference to or connection of outside texts. These types of comments weave together an intertextual network of references from which individual commenters can pull evidence to support identificatory stance-taking and additional meaning attribution. For example, Brian Warrick commented on the post "Just so we're clear: The Left has no problem attacking a 10-year-old if they don't like his father, but if Obama's daughter smokes a bong, anyone who criticizes her gets labelled as a racist bully? Makes perfect sense." Warrick is referencing commenters who he perceives as having made fun of Barron Trump while defending Malia Obama's illegal activity. These two issues are separate from the Women's March itself, but are called upon by the commenter in order to support his personal identifications and his method of deriving meaning from the rhetorical texts.

The final behavior that is relevant to the commenting persona is the ability to connect with other commenters by replying to them. The process of replying is a way for the commenter to situate themselves in relation to others. For example, a response to Shawn Campbell, a commenter cited above, Jane Duncan said "Shawn Campbell, are you REALLY that STUPID???... are you saying the MEDIA is organizing this march?" This statement, though personally directed and inflammatory, shows that the commenter uses the interactive function of the social media platform to engage with other commenters, thus affirming or, potentially, adjusting their own investments in the text. The ability for interactivity is a key functionality of the commenting persona.

Through the various elements I have just attended to, it is possible to begin to see a sketch of what the commenting persona looks like, regardless of the particularities of any individual commenter. The commenting persona has the potential for identificatory stance-making in relation to a rhetorical text, additional meaning-attribution to the text, can draw upon intertextual links to support personal investments, and can interact with members of the commenting community to po-

sition itself in relation to others. While these characteristics may sound somewhat productive and positive, as is evidenced through the isolated comments that I used as exemplars, these comments can manifest themselves in destructive, polarizing ways. Thus, I am not trying to argue that the commenting persona represents an idealized subject that uses the tools of a social media platform to meaningful ends, but rather, that the commenting persona is characterized by the tendency to repeat certain *types* of comments and behaviors, no matter how ill-meaning, vitriolic, or offensive the framing might be.

Using the Commenting Persona in Rhetorical Criticism

The commenting persona is of use to the rhetorical critic who is willing to look outside of the text for how meaning is constructed in the rhetorical audience. The practical application of the commenting persona in rhetorical scholarship almost directly mirrors the project of reception studies, which is to understand how meaning is made by those who consume a text, and how that meaning shapes the original discourse (Hall 1973). In practice, this means that the rhetorical scholar must account for the conversation around a particular artifact, as articulated by the commenting persona. Though each commenter is unique, there often emerges distinct identificatory stances and additional meanings which order themselves through the clutter of the individual voices. To illustrate this, I will go back to the example of the Women's March.

In response to a Facebook post by a woman named Christy Parker who expressed her displeasure that the march claimed to represent "all" women, a group of commenters congregated around the hashtag #notmymarch. Individual commenters expressed similar sentiments that the Women's March did not represent them, and therefore they did not identify with it or take its intended meaning as their own truth. This aggregation of online commenters around a single issue shows the force of a collectivized commenting persona at work. Through taking a definitive identificatory stance and adding meaning onto the original text, this particular commenting persona fundamentally changed the original intent of the rhetorical text. Had a rhetorical scholar not taken into account the commenting persona that stood against the Women's March, they might have attributed significance of meaning to a community for whom it was not present. Thus, in order to utilize the commenting persona in rhetorical criticism, the critic must delve into the conversations surrounding the artifact that occur on social media and elsewhere. This will allow the critic to see how the conversations have added meaning to the original text, and can help to ensure that audience conjectures are representative of the general commenting persona of the particular issue. Unlike empirical audience studies, studying the commenting persona is not an exact science, but there is still remarkable value in engaging with a piece of the actual audience.

Conclusion

In an age where the respected news-sources regularly cover Twitter debates, it is no longer an option to gloss over or ignore the impact that social media and on-line commentary has on shaping social and political narratives. Rhetorical scholars now have an obligation to look towards members of the real audience of modern rhetorical texts to decipher how these texts are being received, commented on, and transformed. By attempting to theorize a commenting persona, I hope to pave a way for reception-based approaches to the rhetorical audience to become more accepted in the field. Looking at audience reception of rhetorical texts affords the rhetorical audience a distinct voice that is absent in all other treatments of the rhetorical persona thus far. Rather than following the tradition of persona which has obscured and silenced the audience, the commenting persona brings a radical presence to the voice of the rhetorical audience by closely interacting with and listening to the actual audience. Through this essay, I hope that the field of rhetoric reevaluates its commitment to making meaningful claims about an audience's response or relationship to a text and considers looking outside of the text for the production of meaning.

The theory of the commenting persona is far from complete, and much work must be done in order for it to remain relevant in an ever-changing media landscape. Future research into the commenting persona might attend to other types of comments and behaviors that were not identified within this essay. More work also needs to be done to distinguish the commenting persona from simply being some variation of an online public. However, I believe that by thinking of those who comment on social media platforms as embodying a commenting persona, studying audience response becomes more attainable and focused. The commenting persona does not limit the value of text-based rhetorical studies, but rather expands the possibilities for making conjectures of meaning specific to a particular audience.

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