

**Supplement**

## Establishing a Presence on the World Wide Web: A Rhetorical Approach

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### Why include this document?

The issues related to web site construction are only one part of "the web puzzle". Another significant set of issues is related to the underlying concept of the web, the psychology of human information processing, the social conditions affecting and being affected by the Web and similar issues.

With each new insight comes more questions.

The more we understand the tools that human society creates, and the ways those tools change the nature of society, the better able we are to deal with localized community conventions and practices regarding those tools.

The way we think about something directly affects the conclusions we reach. So, too, the way we conceptualize the Web has an impact on the kind of web sites we create.

This article, while academic in purpose, has wide-ranging implications for educational web site construction and, more importantly, educational content.

This article examines some of these ideas and offers a framework in which to examine the phenomenon of the Web and the Internet.

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# Establishing A Presence on the World Wide Web: A Rhetorical Approach

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In the past three years many technical and marketing communicators have witnessed and perhaps even participated in the dizzying rush into cyberspace, as a phenomenal number of individuals, institutions, and businesses have created sites on the World Wide Web. At this point, it is apparent that many organizations have sensed that there is value in using this new communication medium, but some are still grappling with questions about what sort of information the medium can best deliver, and to whom. In the rush to establish a presence on the Web, many of the first wave of firms to create Web sites have merely placed for on-line perusal electronic versions of print materials—marketing brochures, catalogs, technical reports—without giving much thought to how the Web might differ from traditional, print-based delivery systems. Having succeeded in establishing an initial Web presence, many are just now starting to think about the unique characteristics of the medium and of the audiences it serves, and how to best take advantage of the possibilities the Web affords. Moreover, most are struggling to figure out just how their sites fit into the eclectic mix of uses to which the Web is being put.

Very generally, there are two classes of sites emerging on the Web: "organization sites," created by institutions, businesses, and other firms, usually with a "real world" equivalent (e.g., The White House, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, AT&T Corporation), and "special interest sites," usually created by individuals acting on their own initiative to provide an on-line voice either for themselves or for a specific concern or area of interest, and usually only existing in the virtual world (e.g., WebGrrls, The Computer-Mediated Communication Study Center, The HTML Writer's Guild). The challenge to technical and marketing communicators engaged in Web design is to consider how the sites they construct should be situated within this cacophony of individual and organizational voices that make up the Web.

In this article I offer a framework grounded in the classic rhetorical concept of *ethos* for thinking about how communicators might begin this consideration. I first suggest that the usefulness and increasing popularity of the Web extends beyond its function as an efficient and economical information delivery system; I discuss how the allure of the Web is based on how well both individuals and organizations use the technology as a means of establishing an on-line presence—an *ethos* that conveys the sorts of values that they hold in common with the Web navigators they wish to attract to the site. Next, I suggest that Web designers, who are most often engaged in constructing Web sites for

organizations, are already familiar with the obvious goal of establishing a professional ethosan *ethos* that conveys credibility, coherency, and unity. But I go on to suggest that it might not be the only *ethos* that they should consider constructing. Another sort of *ethos* Web designers might consider is diverse and communal in nature. I examine how this *ethos* is expressed in the "special interest" Web sites constructed by individuals, and how several commercially-oriented organizations have successfully incorporated this *ethos* into their sites.

## The Construction of Virtual Sites

To begin examining how Web sites can be constructed to convey a specific type of presence or *ethos* requires shifting our thinking about information from a document-oriented schemata to one that is more spatially oriented. This contrasts with how the original designers and many of the current advocates of Web hypermedia technology have tended to think of the Web as a vast collection of documents, a rhetorically-neutral, globally accessible database in which users can find a huge variety of electronic documents (Berners-Lee et al. 1994; Powell 1994). Yet increasingly, users are beginning to conceptualize computers and computer networks as comprising spaces through which they can "navigate." Moreover, researchers in computer-mediated communication have pointed out that computer users tend to conceptualize computer networks such as the Internet using language that maps physical attributes to the virtual locations that the networks comprise (Gurak 1994). World Wide Web users are no exception. The way that users conceptualize the Web is manifested in the language and metaphors they use to describe the Web itself. Many describe the Web as a three-dimensional space with specific locations. For example, a menu in Netscape, one of the software interfaces for accessing the Web, provides a list of "Web Starting Points," virtual locations where new users can "go" to access information about learning how to use the Web.

In addition to this metaphorical construction, the technical design of the Web contributes to the physical conceptualization of Web "cyberspace." The Universal Resource Locators (URLs) for information nodes on the Web serve as cyberspace addresses, and are fast becoming as common on business cards, print ads, and television commercials as are physical addresses and fax and phone numbers. Moreover, central to the metaphorical construction of the Web as physical space is the means by which organizations organize information on the Web. We are all familiar with the language used to describe the Web, and we speak of an organization's or an individual's "home page," an electronic text that serves as an organizing device a starting point for accessing information pertinent to the organizationas well as a metaphorical device for creating a virtual home for the organization. Some organizations carry the metaphorical construction of the home page even further, using language and graphics to conceptualize their organization's home page in terms of three-dimensional physical space. For example, the non-profit organization Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility refers to its home page as a "foyer." In effect, CPSR metaphorically constructs an architectural site a virtual entrance hall to the organization's virtual offices in which Web browsers can "enter." As another example, at MCI's Gramercy Press site Web users are greeted with a photo of a solid stone building which they can "enter" by clicking on any of the windows.

## The Ethos of Virtual Sites

When we begin to think of the Web in spatial terms, then the virtual sites that individuals and organizations establish become more than just points of reference in the cyberspace of the Web, more than virtual reading rooms that Web readers can enter to examine the organizations' documents. As previously mentioned, the overall construction of the sites conveys a presence, which exudes an atmosphere that in turn acts as a means of convincing potential Web readers of the organizations' professionalism, credibility, usefulness or value. In effect, the virtual sites serve a classic rhetorical function: they are means of persuading potential readers to take action, to explore the organization's information, to interact with the organization, perhaps even to join the organization. How do these virtual sites carry out this function? It is useful to think of the virtual sites as means of exhibiting a rhetorical appeal first advocated by Aristotle: the visual cues and hypertextual structure used to construct a Web site can be used to create a site that conveys a specific *ethos*, or character, for the organization.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion" (1991, pp. 36-37). For Aristotle, there were three means of persuasion: logical appeals (*logos*); appeals to emotion (*pathos*), and appeals based on the credibility or character of the speaker (*ethos*). Most technical communicators use these appeals in their work, perhaps without really thinking about it, as they persuade the users of their information products about such things as the credibility and usefulness of the information they provide. In traditional hypermedia and hypertext projects that technical communicators undertake (in which the goal is to present information to a specific group of users to help them complete a specific task), technical communicators frequently make appeals based on *logos* by ensuring that there is a logical structure that the users can follow so that they don't get "lost in hyperspace." Moreover, technical communicators might make an appeal based on *ethos* by using language that is clear, simple, and concise and that therefore appears understandable and credible. And finally (though perhaps less frequently), they might make an appeal based on *pathos* by designing interfaces that use metaphors for calming nervous users by activating familiar frameworks (Gurak 1991).

Just as with traditional hypertext and hypermedia products, Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals are present in the content and structure of the virtual sites that organizations create on the World Wide Web. Because the Web is made up of multiple information sources vying for the attention of multiple information seekers, the virtual sites that organizations establish through their home pages provide numerous examples of the various means of persuasion that Web hypermedia technology avails. Yet each of the appeals combine to establish the character of the organization, the organization's *ethos*. How?

According to Aristotle, the speaker establishes *ethos* by "manifest[ing] the proper character through the choices made in his speech," choices which "manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks..." (Halloran 1982, p. 60). While Aristotle focused on the *ethos* of the solitary speaker, contemporary theorists have expanded the notion of *ethos* to encompass collective acts. Halloran (1982), for

example, points out that "[t]he most concrete meaning for the term [*ethos*] in the Greek lexicon is a 'habitual gathering place'..." (60), a public place where people gather to share experiences and ideas. It is this notion of *ethos* that I believe is useful in describing how the virtual sites that the home pages organizations set up create an *ethos* in conjunction with other rhetorical appeals. In short, while the visual cues, content, and structure of the nodes and links established within the Web site contain all three rhetorical appeals, all appeals work together to convey the values or virtues of the organization. The site, as a rhetorical "gathering place," delineates a location on the Web in which users can "enter" and share in these values. On the Web, establishing *ethos* involves situating the organization's values in a specific social context, a context in which those values, experienced and shared by users who "enter" into the organization's virtual site, become realized. What is of value within the social context of the Web, I suggest, might differ from what is of value within the contexts to which technical and marketing communicators are used to writing, due in part to the unique technical capacities that the Web affords.

### Professional Ethos in the Late Age of Print

An analogy is frequently made between the early days of desktop publishing and the current state of the Web. When desktop publishing was first introduced, inexperienced designers experimented with the plethora of newly available fonts and graphics tools and merely ended up creating documents looking like ransom notes. Similarly, on the Web anyone with even rudimentary HTML skills has succeeded in creating a home page, though many have given little consideration to issues aesthetics, information structure, or usability. The result has been what one writer has described as a "melange of odd and uncomfortable places [which] highlights the need for a more conscious aesthetic to bear on this unique, intangible environment" (Jacobson 1993; p. 328). More than just uncomfortable, many of the sites on the Web today are inconsistent in look and feel and are illogical in information structure. As a result, the information these sites convey loses credibility. Thus, these sites lack a key value for establishing a professional *ethos*.

Fortunately, technical communicators, having skills in the rhetorical analysis of audiences, in the aesthetics of visual communication, in the design of information, and in the dynamics of usability testing are now helping to establish "comfortable" Web sites, those in which the content, appearance, and structure of the site are logical, coherent, and consistent. The idea of establishing an professional *ethos* for an organization is nothing new, and much has been written, primarily in the field of marketing, about ways of establishing a corporate image, a unified, consistent "voice" that expresses how the organization embodies what the potential clients and customers consider valuable. For example, most technical communicators working within an organization are familiar with the company style guide, the codified rules for maintaining consistency in language, in document design, typography, and sometimes even in the design and placement of graphics and in the use of colors and paper stock. In short, technical communicators are already familiar with techniques for conveying a professional *ethos* in the information products they create, and this familiarization is easily transferable to the task of constructing a professionally engaging Web site.

Just as it took time for those new to desktop publishing technology to begin creating professionally looking products, so too are those involved in Web design beginning to create professional-looking sites by, for example, paying attention to how graphics are used consistently for navigation, as well as for conveying information and for aesthetics. Yet the idea of conveying a unified, professional, authoritative voice for an organization via the documents it creates is grounded in the tradition of print, a tradition in which the act of writing and, later, the process of printing gave words a look and feel of permanency and thus established the creator as an authority, and later, as a professional (Bolter 1991; Friedson 1986). But today, in the late age of print (Bolter 1991) the idea that authority and professionalism is embodied in print-based documents is being transformed, as words on the screen are lose the feel of permanency and as the Internet is expanding the number of information creators. As a result, I suggest that one of the values that is emerging on the Web is the ability to establish connections with other information creators. In the next section, I discuss this value, and how it comes into play in establishing what I call a communal *ethos* for Web sites.

### Communal Ethos on the Web

While the obvious reason to establish a Web site for an organization is to provide potential clients with useful information about the organization, and in the process establish the credibility and usefulness of the organization, this reason accounts for only one kind of audience, those who actively seek out the site, either because they are already familiar with the site, or perhaps after having seen the firm's URL listed in some other medium (a print-based brochure or advertisement, for example), or after having used a Web search tool to find information on a specific topic. In all these cases, the Web navigators accessing the site have a specific purpose in mind when traveling to the site: they seek information necessary to help them perform a task to make a decision or answer a question.

But this task-oriented matrix of Web navigators is by no means the only type of users that are traversing the strands of the Web. Part of the allure of the Web is that, along with the wealth of task-oriented professional information it provides, it also permits Web users a means of finding and creating connections to those sharing common interests. For example, much of the discussion about hypermedia technology in general (Lanham 1993; Landow 1992) and the World Wide Web specifically (Tuman 1992) has focused on what many have characterized as its democratizing potential. As December (1994) has pointed out, "On the Web, everyone with the necessary skills owns a press. Dissemination of ideas on a mass and medium scale is no longer filtered through organizations and institutions but can come directly from individuals" (p. 7). The result has been a proliferation of "special interest" sites, virtual clearinghouses of information of use for establishing and forging connections between people sharing common personal interests. This should come as no surprise because the ability to forge connections with others has always been a prime aspect of the Internet.

In the "early" (pre-Web) days of the Internet, a fairly small and common body of users shared in the values of how the Internet should be used. This virtual community was

bound together by what became an unwritten code of understanding encompassing "what it means to be a responsible, honest and polite user" sharing limited computing resources (Hahn 1993). The original Internet community fostered a working atmosphere based on cooperation, mutual aid, and camaraderie (Miller 1995), and sustained by tradition. With the advent of the Web and the flock of new users to the Internet over the last three or four years, the values of this community have been eroded as new users having no understanding or appreciation of the tradition or values on which the original community of users operated.

Yet the vestiges of the values of the original Internet community still exist, and traces of these values emerge when studying the design and content of the sites that many individuals have constructed on the Web. The communal *ethos* on the Web becomes apparent when navigating around the Web with no specific task in mind, checking out the home pages of people from diverse locations around the world, people who are frequently traverse the strands of the Web (though, of course, the Web populace isn't limited to this group) and who are information consumers and also information providers. If the content and links on home pages are any indication, the Web at this point is valuable to many because it is a means of establishing interest enclaves that value and provide

- individual creativity;
- connectivity and interactivity;
- reciprocity.

In short, the Web differs from other media that technical communicators may have worked in precisely because technologically it provides the ability to forge connections with a diverse collection of information sources at multiple and diverse locations, and in the process construct a communal *ethos*. As a result, I suggest that while technical communicators who are designing Web sites should be concerned with establishing their organizations' sites as useful locations for Web navigators to obtain information, they can also look to Web sites created by individuals for ideas about how to foster a communal *ethos*. In the sections that follow, I examine how each of these values is established by the work of individuals constructing "special interest" sites. I then provide an example of how these values have been melded into the construction of more commercially oriented Web sites, while at the same time maintaining a sense of professionalism.

## INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

Because the Web is in many ways democratizing the communication process, one of the most interesting phenomena on the Web is the emergence of personal home pages. Created by individuals, these pages often serve as outlets for self expressionsites for placing personal manifestos, essays and FAQs, digitized artwork, poetry, family pictures, etc., on- line for public view. The home page as a vehicle for self- revelation is becoming a valued feature in some Web communities. As a result, including personal information on a home page serves as a means of enhancing one's "Net presence" (Agre, 1994), and thus in many cases serves to legitimize the credibility of the individual, especially when examined within the specific context in which the individual is situated.

An interesting example of an individual home page expressing this value of creativity and self-expression is that of [Howard Rheingold](#). Rheingold, the author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993), has created a personal Web site in which he displays his artwork and writings. Because in his writings he frequently discusses the value of forging personal connections and sharing resources and talents with others on-line, his own Web site provides an example of what he writes about and thus enhances his credibility.

Based on the value that some Web navigators place on the expression of personal creativity on the Web, Web designers might consider how to facilitate this expression at their organization's site. One firm that has incorporated the value of individual creativity into the more traditional, professional presence of its Web site is OnRamp Technologies. OnRamp has constructed a professional *ethos* by designing a site that has a consistent, unified "look and feel," through its grid structure, through its style and placement of graphics, and through a consistent tone in language and graphics. For example, to express a unified, team-oriented feel, OnRamp has placed a group picture of its employees on a page at its site. Each employee is dressed in a similar looking dark polo shirt. At the same time, the firm counters the monolithic organizational *ethos* conveyed by this "team picture" by allowing the personalities of each employees to show through. The team picture is an image map, and the Web user can click on the face of any employee to bring up the [employee's "official" company home page](#), in which the employee's picture is displayed and in which the employee expresses his or her opinions on a set of company-specified topics, such as "favorite house pet," "favorite movies," "life goals," etc. From this "official" home page, each employee can set up a link to a more personalized, less official home page, in which the employee is free to express her or his own personality, unhindered by the constraints of the company.

The result of OnRamp's allowing employee home pages is that it expresses the value of cultivating a multivoiced, internal community. OnRamp establishes itself as a small firm made up of interesting individuals, and current or potential customers can seek out the people at OnRamp whom seem likely to provide them with needed information.

## CONNECTIVITY AND INTERACTIVITY

One of the most fascinating and alluring aspects of the Web is a tradition that has emerged in which individuals who have created home pages establish on their pages links to their colleagues, friends, or others who share in their interests, in effect creating "electronic tribes" (December and Ginsburg 1995). This tradition has broadened in scope to the point where several individuals have begun assembling lists of people usually having home pages who share a common interest, professional association, etc. An excellent example of a directory established by an individual to facilitate connections between people having common interests is the [NrrdGrrls! Directory](#), a virtual support group that includes a directory of personal home pages for "any woman who has measured herself against the prevailing, confusing, impossible, societal yardstick and found herself coming up short" (NrrdGrrls 1996). The list is open to any woman who sends the list creator an email message citing her interests, home page address, etc.

Based on the idea of creating or strengthening connections between people within a specific interest enclave, Web designers might consider using the Web to set up a directory of clients that use the organization's products or services as a means of facilitating communication between the community of clients. The intent of facilitating communication between clients is similar to the intent of establishing user group meetings for software products; it serves to facilitate frank discussion about the product in ways that are beneficial to both clients and the company.

Another alternative is to provide links to client sites or to the individual home pages of people who use the organization's product or service. For example, Gateway 2000, a computer manufacturer in South Dakota, includes an "interesting people" list at its Web site, a list that includes a [stone carver](#) who uses a Gateway 2000 computer to design his works, and a link to his Web site display of carvings. Serving as a gathering place in which Gateway users can go to meet others, the list serves the virtual equivalent to the picnic that the Saturn Corporation holds for all its car owners in Tennessee. In addition, it serves a marketing function in which the list shows interesting ways that the product is being used.

## RECIPROCITY

Web technology provides a means for cultivating a value that is integral to the maintenance of all communities, the need for "gift-giving" (Hagstrom 1965), the sharing of information or knowledge as a form of extending aid and solidifying bonds with others. For example, in the sciences, gift-giving takes the form of contributing journal articles for the sake of contributing to the growth of the community's knowledge base and with the expectation of receiving recognition from the community in the form of citations, respect, etc. Likewise, this gift-giving was a part of the original Internet culture, in which information, opinions, and knowledge was exchanged in electronic forums such as email discussion lists and newsgroups, with the expectation of receiving recognition in return (Agre 1994).

This spirit of reciprocal gift-giving is central to the construction of "special interest" sites. Many individuals creating "special interest" sites spend much time designing, writing, and constructing lists of links to information of use to a specific community of users for what would appear to be little compensation. Yet, as Phil Agre (1994) has pointed out, creating information sources on the Net is a means of cultivating a professional identity as well as credibility. For example, Ellen Spertus, a graduate student at MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, has compiled a [list of information](#) devoted to "Women and Computer Science." While Ellen is providing a service to all those interested in these resources, she is also reciprocated by enhancing her on-line status as a professional and an aspiring scholar, a status which has led to testifying before Congress, to being featured in the New York Times, and to penning magazine articles.

For technical communicators constructing Web sites, this reciprocity entails providing useful information that is not necessarily directly related to the product or service that the organization provides. One of the qualities of the Web that, as John December (1995) points out, Web designers might want to exploit is that a site can be "porous", allowing Web navigators means to enter a site at multiple points. Providing this

information is one way of creating alternative entry points to the site. For example, Gateway 2000 has included at its site information on [how to download zipped files](#). A user searching for information about zipped files would then find a link to that page within the Gateway site. The ensuing transaction is reciprocal, as the Web navigator receives the "gift" of useful information, while the manufacturer is reciprocated by exposing a potential client to the site. If done well (if the information is useful, accurate, etc.) then this reciprocal gift giving enhances the on-line credibility of the organization by establishing its worth among Web navigators who, in the Gateway example, constitute a sub- community of personal computer users.

## Conclusions

Just as the Internet was originally designed by scientists and engineers, the World Wide Web was created by scientists who envisioned it as an efficient means of transferring documents they use in collaborative work (Berners-Lee, et al. 1994). What the original developers envisioned a rhetorically neutral document database is much different from that into which the Web has evolved: a tangle of rhetorically constructed virtual spaces. In this article, I have suggested a method for technical communicators to use to begin to describe and evaluate these spaces as artifacts having specific persuasive appeals, appeals that are based on the Web's technical capacity to allow connections to be established between information producers sharing common interests. Technical communicators can use the idea of thinking about on-line *ethos* as a starting point for evaluating existing Web sites and for designing new virtual sites that convey the *ethos* of the organizations they work for. This rhetorical approach is by no means definitive, and the designers must evaluate the specific needs and values of the Web navigators to which they wish their sites to appeal. A rhetorical approach can be integrated with other Web development methodologies, such as that suggested by December and Randall (1995). There is certainly room for other methods, and it should be the technical communicator's role to redefine existing hypertext and hypermedia conventions and propose new structures for making the virtual spaces of the Web of value to wider and more diverse audiences.

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