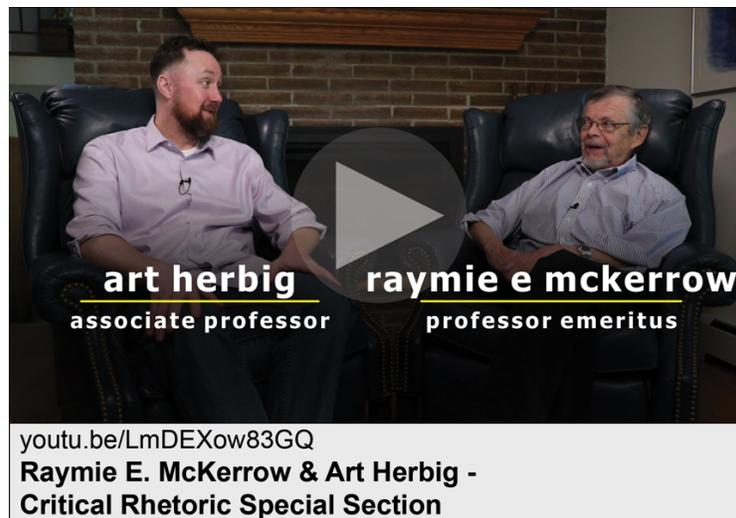


Critical Rhetoric

Introduction

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This introduction discusses the issues and ideas raised in this Special Section as well as the approach taken in its creation. The unique nature of this Special Section makes it important to discuss both the role that critical rhetoric plays in communication scholarship and the ways in which that scholarship is disseminated.

Keywords: critical rhetoric, video, documentary, Foucault, power, language

Since 2007, the *International Journal of Communication* has been publishing important research in the field of communication online and available via open access. It is an important venue for both academics and

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the general public to engage with theory and criticism that has extended the field in meaningful ways. However, despite its existence online, the journal has chosen to remain a vehicle for print publication, until now.

This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* is an exploration of the limits and potentials of the online distribution format as much as it is an exploration of critical rhetoric. It is an attempt to craft scholarship that both critiques and compels. It is an opportunity to examine composition and its role in critique. Or, more simply, it is a hybrid that employs the written work of traditional academic scholarship alongside other forms of digital content crafted for alternative audiences.

There were many reasons we wanted to do this project, but one of the most important is the 30th anniversary of *Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis*. In the time that has passed since McKerrow (1989) first articulated his vision of critical rhetoric, the term has taken on a life of its own. McKerrow (e.g., 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 2001, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016) has continued writing alongside a host of other scholars who have taken up his original idea and applied it in myriad ways. For instance, despite the fact that McKerrow (1989) wrote that he “does not seek to establish the methodology (in the narrow sense of formula or prescription) appropriate to a critical rhetoric” (p. 100), authors such as Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook (2015) have imbued the phrase with methodological implications. It is also grounded in theory, but not necessarily intended as a theory itself. Despite that, scholars such as Hurt (2007) have discussed extensions in the “theory of critical rhetoric” (p. 290). However, if we return to that foundational article from just 30 years ago, we find that McKerrow posits critical rhetoric as an orientation.

With this in mind, our introductory article serves three purposes: first, it will provide an overview of the development of this project and explain the reasons behind interview vignettes the reader will encounter, as well as the rationale for developing a longer documentary that builds on the various articles included in this forum. Second, we will provide a short review of each article’s contribution. Third, we will offer a further clarification on the relationship between domination and freedom, with a focus on how these terms might affect individuals in their everyday lives.

Special Section Overview

As McGee (1990) discussed, by putting the “accent” criticism in critical rhetoric instead of on rhetoric in rhetorical criticism, the obligations and responsibilities of the critic change. This is why, in McKerrow’s initial article, he outlined “principles of praxis.” The critical rhetoric he designed was always meant to be an approach that guided how, when, what, and why critics interjected themselves into discourse.

In keeping with that spirit, the goal of this forum is to provide a fuller examination of the limits and potential of critical rhetoric as an orientation toward criticism. As readers will note, we have also invited scholars outside of rhetoric to comment on the role that critical rhetoric can play in social justice advocacy (Lawrence R. Frey and Joshua Hanan), queer studies (Tony E. Adams), and feminist research (Danielle M. Stern and Katherine J. Denker). Each of these scholars brings a unique approach to their own scholarship that reflects a critical orientation. Learning from their perspectives can help to broaden our conversation about critical rhetoric while also allowing audiences to see how their perspectives reflect thoughtful and critical positions on the world around us. Ultimately, all of this is paired with a belief that, as Herbig (2016)

stated, "the tools for the dissemination of rhetoric have made it possible for critics to operate inside popular culture" (p. 103). At its core, this project is designed to produce scholarship that speaks to diverse scholarly traditions as well as contributes to public discourses about media and culture outside of academe.

What makes this project unique from others who have examined and reflected on the role of critical rhetoric is the inclusion of short video clips of interviews with the authors, as well as a longer documentary, to soon follow, including the thoughts of authors as well as McKerrow's reflections on the past 30 years. Though housed here at the *International Journal of Communication*, this content is meant to be circulated across social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in extending the reach of this research to audiences beyond the scholars who would more naturally access this work in its printed form.

To accomplish this, the scholars on this project have agreed to write articles as well as be the subject of multicamera interviews that examine their perspectives. The video production team (Art Herbig and Alix Watson) traveled to meet with and interview representatives of each of the contributions to this volume as well as some others identified by the editorial team. The goal of these interviews is to get their varying perspectives on the critical rhetoric enterprise. The interview topics and questions were tailored to the individual scholar and their relationship to the idea of critical rhetoric. The team has edited the interviews to produce individual vignettes that are embedded in the articles themselves.

The longer documentary film will treat critical rhetoric as a character with all of the history and tension that comes with the development of an idea inside academia. As it will reveal, our participants do not all agree on the importance or the meaning of critical rhetoric, or how it might be used as a starting point for examining communicative interactions. Having been introduced to critical rhetoric in different ways and in different parts of their respective careers, their narratives present a story about an idea still in progress, but with a history and development worth learning as well as a present worth interrogating and a future worth imagining. To give credit where it is due, Herbig directed the cohesion among the film, vignettes, and written work. Alix Watson served as the production coordinator for this project, tending specifically to the quality and organization of the production content.

Special Section Articles Review

The articles that appear in this forum were commissioned by us; they underwent extensive review by outside experts as well as by us. Taken together, they offer diverse perspectives on the nature of working from a critical rhetoric orientation, as well as offering alternatives that serve to remedy its perceived shortcomings. The following will offer brief glimpses into their respective contributions.

Daniel Brandon and Kendall Phillips offer a historical review of the changes that have occurred since the original article was published. They focus attention on three major initiatives in rhetorical scholarship that have affected the way in which "critical rhetoricians" operate. They begin with a concise and well-crafted review of McKerrow's original 1989 article, noting its primary arguments and the way in which it is oriented toward critical practice. They then introduce Dana Cloud's critical reaction to the original formulation. As they note, her concern is not with why one might be "critical," but rather what one must consider when engaging in a critical analysis. Critical rhetoric, in her view, misses out in not engaging material conditions within society (e.g., economy, labor) that provide the conditions for domination and

severely limit the options for freedom. John Sloop and Kent Ono's focus on "out-law" discourse offers, in Brandon and Phillip's view, a different take on what critical rhetoric might become. Instead of focusing on the dominant voices within a sociopolitical world, Sloop and Ono articulate a need to consider the discourse produced by ordinary citizens—their vernacular voices have been ignored in the singular focus on those already in positions of power. Finally, Brandon and Phillips examine the most recent addition to the lexicon—participatory critical rhetoric. This perspective introduces the critic at the center of analysis—her presence at a rhetorical event under review makes a difference in how the discourse is heard and understood. It puts the critic at the nexus of critiques of domination and freedom, as it forces a consideration of both possibilities in noting the critic's own real experience with the event. As readers will note, both Cloud and the authors of participatory critical rhetoric offer their own perspectives in this forum. This conjunction of ideas represents the reason for continuing a conversation—as similarities and differences may occur between Brandon and Phillips' review and the arguments offered in the respective articles.

Tony Adams articulates a consideration of "forgiveness" as a consequence of experiencing denigration of one's self by others. If one is to be a critical rhetorician, one inevitably encounters discourse that is less than pleasing to the ear as well as potentially damaging to one's own self-concept. How one manages to deal with hateful discourse, while remaining true to one's own sense of how to be a humanizing influence on others, requires the possibility of forgiving the social other. Operating from a queer studies perspective, Adams investigates the problems one may encounter in considering whether, when, and/or how one might forgive—or not. How does one ask the social other to consider the ways in which their views harm others? How does a critical rhetorician seek remediation of negative discourse when the social other seems, or is, impervious to rhetoric that challenges their core beliefs? Although there is no clear answer to these questions, Adams forces us to encounter their presence and contemplate ways to ameliorate otherwise insidious rhetoric.

Art Herbig, Andrew Hermann, Alix Watson, Adam Tyma, and Joan Miller provide an interesting and provocative addition to the eight "principles of praxis" that McKerrow articulated in 1989: #9—criticism is collaborative. This ninth principle, they argue, recognizes that criticism is not solely an isolated event, wherein a single individual observes an event and writes an analysis that attempts to give it meaning. They ground their article in an examination of their own collaborative work, especially in relation to a popular cultural-oriented website, ProfsDoPop.com. Their purpose in using this site is twofold. First, it provides an opportunity for five very different people to use their differences interactively in promoting multiple perspectives on the same topic/event/object (as one example: critical perspectives on Netflix's *Iron Fist*). Their critique becomes much more complex and multifaceted as a consequence. Second, their aim is to move beyond the academy to entice a broader, culturally attuned audience to consider the meanings they articulate and respond to those with their own perceptions. It is hoped that through this exchange, they will have a better chance of affecting understanding of how hegemony constricts popular culture options as well as constrains creativity in their production. Ever realistic, they also acknowledge the constraints. The audience is elusive, and the academy remains hidebound in its narrow consideration of what counts as acceptable scholarship.

Aaron Hess, Samantha Senda-Cook, Michael K. Middleton, and Danielle Endres focus their attention on their previous work in extending critical rhetoric in a participatory direction. In their view, "participatory"

is an open-ended concept covering various actions that place a critic within the bounds of an event, with activity that may range from observation to engagement with others to assisting others in forming rhetorical claims and/or advancing claims on their own behalf as full participants in the event. Their initial section recounts the connections they draw between their conception of participation and critical rhetoric, focusing primary attention on three principles of praxis: ideology, materiality, and performance. Moving further, they take this opportunity to critically examine the expansive range of perspectives underlying "rhetorical field work" that might be engaged in, and interrogate the assumptive framework that both resonates with and is separate from an engagement that represents a critical rhetoric orientation. Their purpose is neither to claim any one approach is better than another, nor to suggest that one or more approaches should be subsumed within/under a specific critical orientation.

Larry Frey and Joshua Hanan focus on the relationship between critical rhetoric and their view of "social justice activism." Although they note that the original formulation attempted to provide a groundwork for such activism, they suggest it failed to posit a clear, distinct telos that would focus attention on underprivileged and marginalized voices. In effect, the original position foreclosed on critique and thus failed to embrace activism explicitly as an application of such an orientation. In describing the requirements for social justice activism, they propose communication activism research (CAR) as the primary "vehicle" through which rhetorical critique can best be executed. In reviewing extant rhetorical scholarship that moves in a social justice activism direction, including participatory critical rhetoric, they note its positive attributes, but argue that it misses one essential ingredient: the need to privilege the scholar's own direct involvement in being an activist advocate for social change. For them, direct intervention by scholars, which can include a critical rhetoric orientation, is required to fulfill the demand for change.

Dana Cloud's article challenges the very foundation of critical rhetoric with respect to its ability to achieve its own goal. Arguing that a contradiction exists in McKerrow's treatment of "domination" and "freedom," Cloud offers the work of Antonio Gramsci as an internally consistent treatment of these options that ultimately saves critical rhetoric from itself. She begins with a clear, concise articulation of critical rhetoric's original thesis as well as more recent scholarship that both advances and criticizes the approach. Writing from the perspective of a "sympathetic critic" (one that agrees with the goal but rejects the means to reach it), Cloud provides an elegant descriptive account of Gramsci's perspective and how it might further the work of critical rhetoric. One very clear distinction grounding her work is the absence of any economic or other context outside discourse that would frame the actions of a critical orientation. Gramsci provides a context that, in contradistinction to critical rhetoric, rejects the operation of discourse in a relativized world. Gramsci, and Cloud, prefer to ground criticism in a foundational world.

Jennifer Dunn offers a focus on both domination and freedom in an intriguing analysis of how the phenomenon best known as "reality TV" frames Donald Trump's preference for using Twitter as his means of communicating with the American public. Using the themes underscoring reality TV (hypermediacy and immediacy), Dunn argues that Trump's tweets construct his rhetorical authenticity as president. As she notes, analyzing his tweets from the perspective of traditional presidential rhetorical address would likely miss the actual rhetorical potency of his approach. In the process, he creates a new "freedom" for how a president might influence American attitudes and beliefs as he ignores traditional dominant forms for presidential discourse. The resulting "new normal" further legitimizes what television had previously

sponsored through its introduction of the illusion of unfiltered and uninfluenced “reality” shows. However else Trump is viewed, it is clear from Dunn’s analysis that he is the reality TV President.

Danielle Stern and Katherine J. Denker’s article on “privileged vulnerability” is a provocative exploration of how best to ensure that the classroom is a space in which students can expose their own vulnerabilities, especially in dealing with issues such as sexual harassment and rape. Using an autoethnographic approach, the article begins with an account of a conversation in Stern’s classroom that changed the plan for that particular day. Working from the overall frame of critical communication pedagogy, the authors comingle a return to that conversation within a theoretical mixture of embodied pedagogy, critical and corporeal rhetoric, and feminism. The analysis that results is a call to reconsider ways in which life experiences can be brought to the fore in an atmosphere that offers protection for the expression of vulnerability.

The Critiques of Domination and Freedom

While the original formulation of “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis” in 1989 has been clarified, expanded, or otherwise reexplained, one of the central issues, as some of the articles here have noted, is considering the relationship between the twin critiques of domination and freedom. McKerrow (1991a) suggested one approach in highlighting domination as freedom from and freedom as freedom to. The purpose here is to review what these phrases might signify, and how they might apply to our personal and professional lives in the present moment.

First, we believe this dual phrasing captures the essence of Michel Foucault’s orientation toward liberation and the practices of freedom. As McKerrow wrote in 1989,

the critique of domination has an emancipatory purpose—a telos toward which it aims in the process of demystifying the conditions of domination. . . . The focus . . . is on the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated. . . . The critique of freedom . . . has as its telos the prospect of permanent criticism—a self-reflexive critique that turns back on itself even as it promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations. . . . Results are never satisfying as the new social relations which emerge from a reaction to critique are themselves simply new forms of power [relations] and hence subject to renewed skepticism. (pp. 91, 92, 96)

Because the relationship between the terms of “freedom from” and “freedom to” is complicated, it will help to clarify how these terms relate to each other. One might think of two sides of the same coin—opposite one another yet containing the same material that binds them together. Although that is suggestive, it is not sufficient as there is an inherent risk in focusing only on one dimension (e.g., freedom), while excluding the other from eventual consideration. They can exist separately, but as Foucault (1997) reminds us, there is a “cautionary tale” to be told. As he notes,

I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. (p. 282)

I want to be very careful here: I am not suggesting that he is against seeking liberation. What he cautions us against is twofold. The first caution lies in thinking that there is something inherent in the nature of things that creates an ongoing oppression that requires one to seek liberation. That which exists as an oppressive force was created at some point in time, and thus can be subject to change. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he cautions against thinking that once one has been liberated, one is "finished." As he goes on to note,

this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. (Foucault, 1997, pp. 282–283)

What this suggests is that it takes both a commitment to seeking freedom from that which appears to be in control of your destiny and a concomitant commitment to seeking for yourself what a new future might be. This twin approach seeks to avoid the query, "We're free; now what?" Practicing one without consideration of the other may well lead to more problems than it might otherwise need to produce.

On the other hand, the practice of seeking freedom to embrace a new self can also exist on its own—it is not always the case that one is always and ever more oppressed. In those instances, or at least in some parts of our life, our ability to resist also suggests an opening toward self-transformation—seeking a change in our circumstances on our own, as another approach to overcoming that which may be oppressive. The Wiccan feminist Starhawk's (1988) conception of three forms of power lends itself well to our current discussion:

"Power over" is expressed in the language of laws and rules that govern our behavior with each other—it is the language of domination.

"Power with" is social power; it is the potentially productive use of power in collaboration with others. We are not equals in terms of talent, social skills, or knowledge, but we can complement and assist each other in accomplishing tasks.

The third sense is the one most relevant to freedom to become other than what you are: It is "power from within." Expressed creatively, it is the power that allows you to challenge yourself, to seek your own future—irrespective of the forces that may be allied against you. It is the power that offers us personal agency in the sense of a "freedom to" assert our right to be taken seriously, to engage the world on our own terms. This is also the source of a very important component of any power relation—especially those engaged in "power over"—for, as noted earlier, freedom implies the possibility of resistance. You may be compelled to respond to a command, but you may resist doing it when and how desired. The central act underlying power from within is personal—it is your practice of freedom that makes a difference in your life. It is not seeking the

practices of others, or assistance within a group, but your own individual attention to yourself and your actions that may produce significant change in terms of exercising a “freedom to” become other than you are at this moment. The possibility of reducing the level of oppression you are experiencing in a given realm may be a positive by-product.

With this review as a foundation, why might one yet see relevance in these terms? The emphasis, and this has been the case since 1989, has almost exclusively been on ways of ending oppression—seeking to overturn dominant forces allied against us. I am not being critical of that emphasis, as it has resulted in excellent work over the years—but it underscores the reasoning behind Foucault’s caution—to isolate liberation as the sole focus may well leave us without clear answers to a most important question: What’s next? What do we do now? Who do we become? And, most importantly, are we done? When teaching feminist rhetoric, McKerrow often explained the need for continued criticism in these terms: What would the world be like if a particular feminist agenda came into being? Would everyone be better off? Perhaps—but any victory over oppressive forces rearranges the power landscape, and as some have argued, inclusiveness is never complete—there is always someone left out of any attempt to be inclusive. This is the contemporary relevance of a critique of freedom. We only need to consider the change in power relations that has followed Trump’s victory—while some or even most of us are not happy with that change, we need to realize that others are ecstatic—they are finally in what they believe to be a dominant position and can now have their way recognized and validated as new rules for living together.

Another approach to assessing relevance takes us back to the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Stokely Carmichael (1965/1971) argued that Black people should engage in self-definition, “because people who can define are the masters.” He goes on to say that

the first need of a free people is to be able to define their own terms and have those terms recognized by their oppressors. . . . The power to define is the most important power that we have. (pp. 64–66)

Again, in teaching feminist rhetoric, McKerrow drew from his language in using an expression that cannot be denoted as an original phrase, or Carmichael’s, as its origination is lost in the mist of time. Nonetheless, that expression is “The power to define is the power to be.” It is the power to name oneself rather than being named by others. It is the power to claim a reality for oneself that others may or may not see. It also is the power to reject names provided by others. As one example, consider the transformation of the word “queer” from a term of derision and denigration to a term that is now normalized in convention programs and college classes under the title “queer studies.” More recently, reclaiming “nasty woman,” originally expressed as a derisive comment, is precisely what is intended within the compass of a critique of freedom. Not all terms can be redefined and claimed—but when that can occur, the result changes the nature of power relationships and opens the way for new changes that may yet occur.

In bringing this review to a close, we want to highlight three implications that underscore the continued relevance of seeking both freedom from and freedom to: First, as Foucault’s own work has illustrated for us, what passes as convention is not inherently fixed within the social order—our social lives are not held in check by forces impervious to change. What we have built we can modify or alter to suit our present needs.

Second, whatever changes we make, we need to realize that we are not yet finished; perfection forever eludes us as we realize there is more work to be done—whatever oppression we have lessened or ended is only a small part of the forces allied against us; whatever we are free to become, once realized, merely opens the possibilities for further change. And, more importantly, whatever improvements we have made in seeking inclusion of social others has also created new exclusions for different others. Hence, the task of permanent review and critique of new relations of power.

Finally, we can take comfort in the fact that expressions that underlie freedom from and to are alive and well in our contemporary world. On January 21, 2018, 5 million people worldwide and more than 1 million in Washington, DC, made their voices heard. One month later, a day without immigrants gave voice to the continuing protest over immigration restrictions. On March 8, 2018, International Women’s Day saw multiple protests under the general headline “a day without women.” These are manifestations of what it means to explore a new “freedom to be” that claims a space for that change and occupies it. It is a move reminiscent of Rosa Parks sitting down in a bus, and African Americans invading an otherwise forbidden space to occupy seats in a restaurant.

Moving Forward

After 30 years, this Special Section is by no means trying to close the book on critical rhetoric. Quite the contrary—our goal is to be among those that are trying to reinvigorate the idea that being critically engaged and active is cool. Part of that goal is about finding new ways to reach out to new audiences, and part of that is turning inward and acknowledging that as critics we are flawed and bound to our own perspectives. For instance, we have grounded our interpretations of freedom and liberation in the work of Foucault. In her work on intersectionality, Hancock (2016) cautions us that thinking about power using Foucault as an origin can be limiting. More scholars from all backgrounds should be reading the work of scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (e.g., 2000/2009), Kimberlé Crenshaw (e.g., 1989), and Karma Chàvez (e.g., 2013) to consider positions and perspectives that may or may not conform to their established perspectives, but are certainly underrepresented in the academy as a whole. However, we must also uplift and embrace diversity in our approach to discourse. The critical rhetorician brings their positions to much larger conversations and must position themselves as a member of and not a commenter on discourse. Part of being a good participant is acknowledging your own subject position and embracing the positions of those with different backgrounds (even if that means acknowledging that you are two heterosexual White guys who live in the U.S. Midwest).

Many will consider this Special Section “different,” for better or for worse. It is in that spirit that we would like to promote the “freedom to” as a means to diversify, challenge, and reimagine what we mean by scholarship. Critical rhetoricians ask great questions more often than finding simple answers. It is in the complexity that we thrive. In times that are increasingly more conflicted, controversial, and complicated, critical rhetoricians can challenge what we think we know and collaborate on what comes next.

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