An Introduction to The Evolving Media's Impact on Rhetoric and Society: Critical and Ethical Issues

Elizabeth C. Fine and Gary W. Selnow
(bfine@vt.edu; gary@wiredinternational.org)

The 22nd International Colloquium on Communication, held July 25-30, at the University of Vienna, Austria, centered on the theme: "The Evolving Media's Impact on Rhetoric and Society: Critical and Ethical Issues." The general theme was developed by conference attendees during the previous session (held in Schoodic Point, Maine) and was later refined by organizers, Susanne Heine and Gary Selnow, with advice and guidance from Hellmut Geissner and Elizabeth Fine. Participants were asked to explore the implications that new and changing media have for rhetoric and society, and how they impact social movements, politics, human agency, and civil society in the 21st century.

The twentieth century saw the introduction of three new media, each of which, in its time, radically changed society. It began with radio in the early 1920s. With the spoken word, radio reduced the abstraction of newspapers, opened windows to nonreaders, and revealed unheard-of wonders to the human imagination. There was a liveness to radio. It could take ten million listeners to a convention, a rally, or the signing of an armistice. At best, a newspaper, even with speedy "extras'" could only retell the events and only later touch readers never assembled as one. Radio delivered a sense of community—the brand-new feeling that you were sharing a moment with "everyone else." The idea of community is key, and what radio started, 40 years later, television would expand in the formation of global collectives.

It took just several years for television to swoon audiences around the world. Record breaking adoption patterns during the mid-1950s brought in millions of viewers and created a new presence in the daily schedules of people everywhere. With two or three dominant networks in the U.S. and in most European countries, audiences coalesced around the same programming, and this had the effect of forging communities bound not by geography but the media themselves. Eric Sevareid, a broadcast news legend in the United States, once called TV the national hearth. "Everyone" gathered around the TV to watch the same evening programs, and we all were warmed in these national assemblies.

That changed with remarkable speed. In less than a generation, with the launch of Satcom I in 1975, cable was born, and we had dozens of channels; then came satellite, and we had hundreds of channels; then the Internet surfaced, and we had tens of thousands of Web sites, then millions of them. Through it all, the hearth cooled, assembled audiences broke down, and we went our separate ways. We are left today warmed by our individual candles with a few like-minded souls, enjoying our special news and views and tailor-made entertainment. With the onset of audience fragmentation went the remarkable unification of national, even global audiences--and the commons took a hit.

The media today appeal to our natural inclinations to fix on topics we like, to dwell on viewpoints we prefer, to confirm our biases and avoid our aversions. In less than half a century, we transformed from populations united by our media to populations divided by them. This has converted once broad and sweeping audiences into narrow and parochial clusters.

So what? In principle, there is nothing wrong with giving people what they want. Who would care to return to the days when we received all our news from print or radio or from a handful of networks? But anything with the potential to alter the flow of news and information and to affect

how millions of people spend six or more hours each day is likely to have consequences.

This micro-media environment is still maturing, so the full impact is not yet manifest, but already we are seeing effects. The politics of nations are changing along with the capacity of leaders. Communications by every stripe of activist can now target audiences more precisely. It is abundantly evident with the Internet, but the focus is apparent in all media.

Never before have populations been sliced and diced and subdivided so thoroughly for political and commercial advantage. With audience segmentation so easy and efficient, our common agendas and reference points are yielding to individual preoccupations, and this weakens empathy, tolerance and compromise. Just where do we assemble anymore? We don't regularly gather around the same agenda-setting forums; we have become the iPod population, enveloped in our personal media pods.

Even though the media have been with us for only an eye-blink of human history, they have integrated so fully into our experiences, our way of thinking, and our relationships with each other. In ninety short years, they had once united us around common themes, and then whip sawed us in the other direction. Yet recent political uses of cell phones and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube in the Arab Spring and other social movements suggest that the evolving media can play a powerful role in building civil society and coordinating democratic protests (Shirky 2011). Indeed, as Philip N. Howard argues, the "social media's role in strengthening civil society will likely prove its most lasting contribution to political culture." Further, the Internet enables individual users to create and disseminate content and thus challenge the dominance of mainstream, corporate-controlled media. As Howard concludes, "Digital media's most lasting impact may be that it acclimates citizens both to consuming and to producing political content" (Howard 2010).

Whether or not the social media contribute to the common text of a nation or reinforce the Balkanization of a population remains to be seen. Clearly, at this early stage of development, the social media have not had the homogenization effects of network television; we have hints that they might even work in the other direction, tightening the perimeter around likeminded groups. Still, it's early, audiences are exploring, and the impact of social media on national cohesion remains to be seen. This Colloquium was designed to address the changes and the challenges of the emerging media and to look at the consequences to our evolving society.

In an age of rapid technological change and evolving media, it is not a surprise that the media through which people communicate influences a broad spectrum of society. The ICC's theme, "The Evolving Media's Impact on Rhetoric and Society: Critical and Ethical Issues" stimulated a wide variety of papers that fall into five thematic areas that provide the structure for this volume: repercussions on society, storytelling, pedagogy, religion, and politics.

Three contributors focus on the repercussions of the evolving media, particularly on children. Hellmut Geissner, a co-founder of the International Colloquium on Communication over 40 years ago, probes the ethical paradox arising from a conflict in Germany between the desire to protect children from the child pornography that circulates through the Internet and the desire of many to protect freedom of communication on the Internet. Geissner explores the tensions in "the collaborative attempt to create at least a precarious balance between order and freedom" in protecting children from abuse on the Internet. Also engaged with the repercussions of the evolving media on children, Edith Slembek, from Lausanne, Switzerland, examines how electronic devices in children's playrooms are affecting their reading ability and creativity. In "The Electronic Invasion in the Playroom," Slembek examines how electronic media usage by children is affecting their development of communicative competence. In "European Kids Online: Minimizing Risks and Maximizing Opportunities," Renate Csellich-Ruso from Vienna, Austria, synthesizes data from studies about how young people in Europe and Austria are using the Internet to point to potential risks of Internet usage, as well as opportunities to mitigate those risks.

Two articles fall under the rubric of storytelling and the evolving media. Eric E. Peterson and Kristin M. Langellier, from the Department of

Communication at the University of Maine, Orono, critically examine claims about new storytelling practices on the Internet, known as "digital storytelling." They argue that analog and digital communication "are not opposed to each other; they overlap and spiral as well as alternate in the shift of storytelling performance to written form." They explore the critical and ethical issues that emerged from their involvement in the Somali Narrative Project at the University of Maine. Focusing on a particular kind of storytelling about the fleeting celebrities of popular culture in "Temporary Celebrity: Media 'Fodder' and Diversion," Sam G. Riley, from the Department of Communication at Virginia Tech, argues that temporary celebrities are "shooting stars" that provide "vivid and varied splashes of color on our enormous media canvas." Making use of his own book-length experimental informational blog on temporary celebrity culture, Riley offers a 21-category typology of temporary celebrities.

The evolving media also influence pedagogy and two contributors to this volume offer examples from their own practice as teachers. Eberhard Wolf, a communication trainer for the public broadcasting channel, Swiss Television (SF), is responsible for training all of the Swiss TV channel's employees who deal with language-related forms of communication. Wolf explores the differences and interrelationships between face-to-face and audio-visual technically transmitted forms of communication and their implications for the communication trainer in "Face-to-Face and AVT-Forms of Communication: Pedagogical Interventions – Conditions and Possibilities." Annette Mönnich, in the Department of German Language and Literature at Ruhr-Üniversitat Bochum, Germany, explores listener behaviors in the "feedback communication" between audience members and speakers in her public speaking courses. In "Forms and Functions of Listener Behaviors in Audio-Based 'Feedback Communication,'" Mönnich focuses on the response tokens of listeners by using participant observation and transcriptions of audiotapes and videos of speeches given by students in her courses.

Three contributors to this volume offer essays related to religion and the evolving media. Martin Peier-Plüss, member of the management of "Reformierte Medien" (reformed media) and Commissioner for Radio and Television of the protestant churches of German-speaking Switzerland, explores how young people use the Internet and the implications of that usage for churches in Europe. In "Internet—the Agora of the 21st Century: Communication of Young People on the Internet," Peier-Plüss makes the case for European protestant churches to learn to communicate with young people through the Internet. In "Communication Possibilities in Religious Pedagogy: The Austrian Protestant Diaspora in Times of Media Networking," Moritz Stroh, from the University of Vienna, Austria, explores the impact of digital networking on the teaching of religion in Austrian schools. Henner Barthel, from the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany, analyzes the handling of the Psalm through history and changing media in "The Psalm: Ethical and Critical Notes Referring to its Media History."

Two essays in this volume deal with the political realm and the evolving media. In "How to Sell Wars," Wulff Bickenbach, from Düsseldorf, Germany, examines how the political and military leaders used the media to gain and maintain support for wars in the Gulf, the Balkans, and Afghanistan, and offers some predictions about future efforts to sell wars to the public. In "Rhetorical Strategies of Environ-mental Cyber-activists," Elizabeth Fine, from the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech, examines the critical rhetoric of four different kinds of environmental websites to evaluate how cyberactivists are using the Internet to motivate citizen action. Fine uses comparative impact data from the Internet web information site Alexa to help evaluate the audience appeal of various rhetorical strategies.

Finally, several people deserve thanks for their leadership and contributions to making the 22nd International Colloquium on Communication a success. Susanne Heine, from the University of Vienna, hosted the Colloquium, garnering University support and arranging a spectacular fieldtrip to the Melk Abbot. Gary Selnow, from San Francisco State University and Wired International, served as the U.S. organizer, soliciting participation from U.S. scholars. Hellmut Geissner played a key role in arranging our lodging at the Benediktushaus in Vienna, and Edith

Slembek took charge of collecting the European papers for this volume. Special thanks to Holly Jordan for her editorial assistance and to Anne Lawrence, Online Editor at the Digital Library and Archives at Virginia Tech, who helped us make the proceedings available digitally.

References:

HOWARD, P. N. 2010: "The Lasting Impact of Digital Media on Civil Society." *eJournal USA*, January 25. Department of State. http://www.america.gov/st/democracyhr-english/2010/January/20100126140433mlenuhret0.8288081.html

SELNOW, G. W. 1998: *Electronic Whistle-stops: The Impact of the Internet on American Politics*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger

SELNOW, G.W. "Tribute to Gordon Sabine," Michigan State University, College of Communication Arts and Sciences, 2003

SHIRKY, C. 2011: "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs,* January-February. New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media