Critical Literacy in a Digital Era: Technology, Rhetoric, and the Public Interest by Barbara Warnick, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002

Eliot Rendleman

University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557, USA

The target audience for Warnick’s book consists of “teachers, students, and members of the general reading public who are interested in how persuasive [print and online] discourse” (p. vii) influences how people perceive Internet media. Her overarching questions for each of the case studies are (a) what groups are included and excluded in the discourse of the publication, and (b) how does the discourse accomplish its implicit or explicit rhetorical goals? With these questions in mind, Warnick critically analyzes three case studies that include several issues of Wired magazine from 1994 to 2000; cybergrrl web sites and e-zines in the mid-1990s; and political parody web sites of the 1996 and the 2000 elections. Her studies are text- and image-based criticism, taking into account “textual context by considering media commentary, reader reactions, reviews, and textual responses” (p. 16).

Warnick chose Wired for one of her case studies because it has a “readership of over one-half million, [and] this magazine plays an influential role in the thinking of its subscribers and some segments of the public” (p. 16) and because “Wired has been the only mass-circulation magazine designed to report on cutting edge, computer-based communication technology” (p. ix). She found from her survey of Wired’s late nineties issues that the magazine’s rhetorical strategies included predictable “writing formulae, narrative structures, argument forms, and patterns of emphasis and neglect” (p. 16).

Overall, Warnick notes that the magazine preached to the proverbial choir, typically appealing to the technoliterate and new libertarians (people who subscribe to core libertarian ideology such as reduction or elimination of taxes and government regulation, privatized healthcare, and a completely laissez faire economy). The qualifier “new” designates the particular group of libertarians who believe they can achieve their goals with and through computer technology, solving many world problems and closing racial and economic gaps. Instead of the in-depth,
investigative reporting that one might expect from such a magazine, Warnick labels the majority of *Wired* articles epideictic, a classical rhetoric term referring to celebratory oration and text. She explains that *Wired* contained laudatory content focusing on uncontroversial topics, written in a familiar style and arrangement the audience recognizes, viewed as a performance “to reinforce and emphasize shared values rather than to stimulate critical thinking and deliberation” (p. 24). If the articles were deliberative at all, the decisions for the future were to buy into computer technology both figuratively and literally; and if the articles were judicial at all, then the implicit judgment was that computer technology has accomplished only good for the individual and society.

What I find particularly interesting about this first chapter on *Wired*, called “The ‘New Frontier’ of Cyberspace,” is Warnick’s thorough discussion and analysis of the celebratory articles about computer technology entrepreneurs. Typically the articles on entrepreneurs opened with a description of the situation and the challenge, followed by praise for the entrepreneur’s mental capabilities and strategies for the challenge, and concluded with “the promise of his eventual success” in software development or sales (p. 28). In this section of the chapter, Warnick analyzes “GenEquity,” a typical *Wired* article describing the foils encountered and the successes achieved by six hopefuls in the computer technology industry. The narratives of these newcomers represented argument from model, models typically representing the pioneer archetype and the North American work ethic. The argument implied by these rags-to-riches stories was that readers could make it too, if only they found and locked on to solving current problems with the single-minded focus and persistence of an ant performing its instinctual chores.

Certainly pointing out what was emphasized in the *Wired* articles is of great importance in Warnick’s examination, but even more interesting in the analysis of the article “GenEquity” is her routing out of omissions. One entrepreneur’s success was based on deceiving the immigration service; another “worked for a company that served pornography site businesses” (p. 37); a third sold drugs as a springboard for his entrepreneurial success; and a fourth used payola in his home country to get ahead. In Warnick’s examination readers cannot only see the exclusion and inclusion of particular audiences by association and dissociation, but they can also see the not-so-wholesome facts bearing on the success of these arguments from model. Warnick shows readers that the model *Wired* presents is incomplete, and a complete model would suggest that if one wanted to join this successful group of computer industry entrepreneurs, one must be prepared to make both legal and moral sacrifices to get ahead.

Toward the end of chapter one, Warnick sees some hope for *Wired’s* imbalanced reportage and sanguine perception of the future’s use of computer technology and communication. In an April 2000 issue of *Wired*, well-known software programmer and developer Bill Joy wrote the feature article and looked at the future of technology with a critical eye, noting potential problems and possibilities of robotics, genetics, and nanotechnology (p. 56). It appears that Warnick applauds this article with some hesitation when she writes, “The appearance of Joy’s piece also indicates that *Wired* is prepared to... influence the thinking of its influential readership... but its owners, editorialists, and writers may to some extent need to rethink their preferences and priorities to do so” (p. 60). I am left wondering why this magazine needs to rethink its preferences. Is it because *Wired* is deceptive when the magazine presented on its 1999 “About Us” page that it “‘delivers incisive analysis and resonant storytelling...” (p. 23)?
Alternatively, does the magazine have some inherent civic duty to the public because of its readership size, a readership that could affect the politics and Internet policy of this country? Warnick does have “Public Interest” in the subtitle of her book, so this may be the case. It seems to me that her criticisms are more accusatory than strictly analytical and descriptive, and that one could equally accuse magazines such as *Mother Jones*, *The Progressive*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Field & Stream*, and *Popular Mechanics* of the rhetorical strategies of exclusion and inclusion, or emphasis and neglect, to influence their audience.

Not only can readers find the elitist rhetorical strategies of the writers or “technophile rhetors” in *Wired* magazine (Warnick, 2002, p. 64), but also in popular mainstream magazines and web sites supposedly geared toward women. In Warnick’s second chapter, “Masculinizing the Feminine,” she opens with an explanation of how elitist technology advocates create hierarchies through the rhetorical strategies of “argument from model, argument from hierarchy, dissociation, and metaphor” (p. 64). She further explains that these appeals to hierarchy are powerful and are based on Kenneth Burke’s observation that “all humans are intrinsically motivated by the principle of perfection, the need to move upward (mostly, and sometimes downward) in the many hierarchies that shape their social, political, and spiritual lives” (p. 69). Therefore, most of the arguments in women’s popular, print media and web sites demonstrate that women can move up in the world with an understanding and a desire to use technology, gaining social and economic power in society, no longer the victims either in their homes, in their communities, or in their careers.

Besides demonstrating in chapter two the exclusionary language and rhetorical strategies of popular print magazines and web sites, Warnick explains an interesting paradox found in both media. In articles from *Cosmopolitan*, *Ms.*, *Glamour*, and *Essence*, Warnick discovered that although these magazines attempted to invite women to become computer savvy and to benefit from the rewards of computer technology, they inadvertently marginalized and discouraged the very group they were trying to invite. She “found that much of this discourse exhorted women to get involved with technology or reproached them for having failed to do so [and] hardly seemed likely to succeed as an invitational strategy” (p. ix). Warnick also found four appeals employed by these mainstream magazines to encourage uninitiated women to use computer communication and the World Wide Web (p. 77). The first appeal the magazines used showed the rewards of being Net literate. The second appeal used arguments from model, where the magazine and web site authors wrote narratives celebrating high-ranking, woman programmers, company presidents, and CEOs. Third, the authors tried to simplify technological explanations needed to get online, thereby “facilitating action” (p. 76). Finally, the fourth strategy used was a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps appeal, or the “just do it” approach (p. 75).

Based on Warnick’s length of discussion and tone, it seems as though the first appeal—luring women to the techno-savvy fold—is less of a problem for her and for the public interest than the invitational paradoxes of encouragement and intimidation found in the second, third, and fourth appeals. As an example of the second, Warnick’s sample magazines told the stories of millionaire women leading national and international software companies as examples to emulate. At the same time these articles presented these positive models for emulation, they tried to scare and blame women into action by writing such statements as “if we intend to compete in tomorrow’s job market—or have our children compete—we better get with the program” (p. 76). The finger pointing of these magazines juxtaposed with the positive images...
of the role models was certainly condescending and confusing to me, if not paradoxical or ironic.

Although the second appeal directed the technically uninitiated woman reader in opposing directions, the third appeal pushed her toward the world of computer technology by nonchalantly addressing computer technology. Even if they succeeded in making the complex simple, these authors were insensitive to the fact that many women are underpaid, underemployed, and are strapped financially trying to raise their families. Adding insult to injury, one author offered a shocking and patronizing solution to the women’s financial problem when she suggested that women of the African American middle class “do without ‘those Air Jordans, those Steelers jackets and brand-new Beemers’” (p. 76).

In Warnick's examination of three web sites created by women “to market their own media design activities and other products” and “to invite women online and get them involved in web-based activities” (p. 78), she found the same elitist discourse found in print magazines. The web sites in this study suggested that women who could negotiate the brutal, wild, and unknown realm or frontier of (the mid-1990s) cyberspace were successful and in control, while women who were passive or apathetic and found cyberspace complex and overwhelming were, by implication, weak and, thus, were failures. In this examination, Warnick’s assessment clarifies the irony of these marginalizing strategies prevalent on the sites produced by women for women.

For the final rhetorical analysis in chapter two, Warnick examines the metamorphosis from the goading, paradoxical women’s sites to the low-tech, more inclusive web sites called e-zines. Warnick found e-zines “emphasized artistic expression (in writing and graphics), social support. . . , music and film reviews, and gripes about coverage of women’s issues in the popular press” (p. 83). While her presentation of textual evidence appears extensive in the previous section on cybergrrl sites, the evidence used analyzing the e-zines from 1997 and 1998 (p. 83) seems too sparse to me. From one perspective, there was an imbalance of analytical treatment. Warnick claims, “Some of the top-ranked e-zines were very professional in design, writing, and quality, and . . . provided valuable information resources and forums for issues of interest to girls and young women” (p. 84). Where is the textual evidence that these sites were professional in design, writing, and quality? Moreover, does this imply through dissociation that the exclusionary sites she previously analyzed are unprofessional in design, writing, and quality? Or, perhaps, there is a larger issue at stake: Should we even compare these e-zines with the more tech-heavy sites, since the e-zines focus on everyday people and concerns and the tech-heavy sites rightfully have a more specific target audience? We might be back to the question of rhetors and civic duty. Even the e-zines Warnick praises in this laudatory section are accused of techno-elitism using the second appeal of facilitation when she parenthetically notes in the previous section, “Many sites cheerfully reminded the reader: ‘Can’t read this menu? Upgrade your computer!’” (p. 77).

Warnick’s final case study, “Parody with a Purpose,” analyzes eight parody sites for the 2000 presidential campaign. She states that her purpose is twofold. First, Warnick wants “to show how these sites comprised a sort of discursive enclave held together by common sources, intertextual allusions, networked links, and intersite redundancies” (p. 90). By comparing the content and design of 2000 campaign parody web sites and 1996 sites, she pursues her second purpose of demonstrating “how forms of web-based communication in this area have changed as the dynamics of the medium itself have changed” (p. 90).
Warnick effectively demonstrates what common sources or text helped draw together and possibly influence the audience of parody sites. The easy parodic fodder for the quasi-political web sites Warnick studied were Bush’s “vacuous” (p. 97) discourse and Gore’s speeches that “reminded readers that [his] thinking often seemed unimaginative and, well, boring” (p. 100). Warnick contends that the site author emphasized the circularity of welcoming text on Bush’s real home page to ridicule the candidate. Another parody site author lampooned Gore’s typical position—that government should create programs to solve many of the nation’s problems—with his predictable pattern of his speeches where he begins with the problem, dramatizes it with a narrative, explains the Clinton administration’s progress toward a solution presented with facts, and concludes with his own initiatives (p. 98). Finally, both candidates were easy targets for parody because of the many malapropisms they made in their speeches.

In her comparison of the 1996 campaign web sites and those of 2000, Warnick shows us the differences in structure and content and similarities in consequences. On one hand, a significant problem with 1996 political parody sites was a typical link arrangement that was disorganized and inconsistent, with external links mixed haphazardly with internal links causing readers to become lost (p. 109). On the other hand, the 2000 sites’ links were well-organized, keeping the reader oriented and on the site, especially for the goal of selling merchandise. Two changes that occurred from 1996 to 2000 were the potential for libel lawsuits and the expense increase of producing and maintaining successful political parody sites. Because of a Bush lawsuit against one site author in 2000, many existing and would-be political parody site authors either discontinued their sites or avoided creating a site altogether. The other change that occurred was the higher cost of maintaining these web sites. One aspect of these well-designed sites was more traffic; and with more traffic came a higher fee for site hosting. Finally, the danger Warnick points out common to both 1996 sites and 2000 sites was “the cost of playing into existing stereotypes and giving the illusion of political participation” (p. 111). Because of these monetary obstacles and fears of litigation, the typical gatekeeping and restrictions found in print political discourse transferred to the online political arena.

Critical Literacy in a Digital Era concludes with “Whom Does Technology Serve?” In addition to reviewing her goals and discoveries, Warnick compares the uncritical advocates of computer technology with technology critics who have “issued dire predictions...unable to project a vision of a future in which technology improves society” (p. 122). Warnick calls for a counternarrative to the current unquestioning stories and shallow analysis presented by the techno-elite, but she believes that those accepting her challenge and constructing this counternarrative should find “a rhetorical middle course...between uncritical enthusiasm for new technologies and bleak rejection of them” (p. 125). By using her analytical method and a future, successful counternarrative, the public can learn to make informed choices with regards to computer technology; and they will be able to expose “some of the underlying myths, narratives, stereotypes, assumptions, and forms of argument” (p. 127) as Warnick does in her book.

As a member of her target audience of students, teachers, and general readers, I believe I gained a great deal from Barbara Warnick’s book. It is an implicit argument from model similar to some of the narratives she analyzed but, of course, in a more positive light. Her clear, methodical approach to the texts she examined is certainly an inspiring process and something scholars should emulate in their own studies. Warnick presents her major and minor
hypotheses in language that is accessible to a broad audience—from undergraduates to veteran scholars—along with presenting her supporting evidence and explications in a recognizable and easy to understand arrangement. Warnick demonstrates this keen awareness of her audience by clarifying key terms in rhetorical studies, such as epideictic, for audiences outside of this unique field. I would certainly recommend this book to colleagues in rhetoric, composition, communications, cultural studies, and other humanistic fields interested in learning how to adapt one analytical methodology to a variety of critical purposes.

*Eliot Rendleman* teaches composition at the University of Nevada, Reno. His interests are rhetoric, basic writing and writers, and the possibilities for hypertext argumentation in and beyond academia. He can be reached at <rendlem2@unr.nevada.edu>. 