

Genre And Persona In Activist Websites

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GENRE AND PERSONA
IN ACTIVIST WEBSITES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Digital texts present significant challenges to technical communicators in terms of genre and persona. Because of the ubiquity of electronic media, we increasingly embrace digital formats over print-based documents. As a result, technical communicators must now devise the means to cue audiences to the purposes of digital documents in any given discourse community. We can only convey meaning to our Internet audiences through the use of appropriate standards and elements—recognizable generic forms and rhetorical cues—that we designate as conventions in specific digital discourse. Just as we use file and folder office metaphors for information stored on computers, digital activist communities use campaign metaphors to signal the intentions of their electronic pages. Although these electronic pages, such as “Take Action,” “Donate,” “Lobby,” and “Speak Out,” have the same names as their print-based counterparts, they represent digital generic forms, such as letters, flyers, and receivables, which occur in a virtual world rather than genres that exist in a physical community. If we examine activist sites in terms of digital-format texts, we can become familiar with the genre and forms of activist sites and determine site-visitor responses to the personas of the sites, which will help us to determine our ability to inform our audiences and call them to action.

This study looks at six activist websites in terms of genre and persona to identify electronic-text conventions and forms that must be recognizable to site visitors in order for digital activists to effectively communicate. Activist organizations were among the first to understand the power of digital media as tools to disseminate information, lobby decision-

makers, boycott corporations, broadcast opportunities for real and virtual legal protests and civil disobedience, and engage in subversive activities. Activist websites already use a number of text forms and visual rhetorical elements to cue the site visitor; many of these text forms are common to the activist websites examined for this thesis and constitute an identifiable and distinct genre.

In terms of persona, this study examines the electronic “public self” of activist websites. The arena is a metaphor for the virtual world; the rhetors are the activist sites; and the debate—the intertextual conversation—is the digital discourse that occurs among website users, activist sites, and targets. By categorizing activist sites in terms of their primary activities—helping, protest, and revolutionary—we determine which elements of genre repeat according to categories and we ultimately gauge the intensity of the outcome that the website rhetor hopes to create in the user. Designers and owners of activist sites have goals which can only be reached by means of effective, well-considered, digital genre and persona.

Because many technical communicators and students of technical communication first experience the profession through service learning for a nongovernmental organization—often an activist organization—this study will help those technical communicators to reconsider their own assumptions about genre and persona and may lead those students to understand the importance of privileging genre and persona when designing and redesigning digital texts. This study provides a framework that both experienced and new technical communicators can apply to documents in order to (1) cue site visitors to the meaning of electronic texts and (2) construct effective public personas in the digital forum.

To Eddie and Glenn, who fill my life with love, laughter, and joy.

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Happy Trails,

Maggie Boreman

“Only a fool would leave the enjoyment of rainbows to the opticians. Or give the science of optics the last word on the matter.”—*Edward Abbey*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALF	Animal Liberation Front
ARPANET	Advanced Research Projects Agency Internet
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
EDA	electronic direct action
ELF	Earth Liberation Front
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
HSUS	Humane Society of the United States
HTML	hypertext markup language
ICT	information and communication technology
KFC	Kentucky Fried Chicken
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PDF	portable-document format
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
PSA	public service announcement
TIA	Total Information Awareness

CHAPTER ONE: ACTIVIST USE OF THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Introduction

Since the late 1980s activists have used the Internet successfully to inform, protest, subvert, fundraise, and organize people and movements across virtual and physical worlds. The Internet has played a crucial role in the organization of everything from global protests to town meetings. Today, activist websites present sometimes nonlogical yet often persuasive arguments designed to inform, educate, and motivate users to action. In the context of an activist website, action can include everything from users changing their opinions, donating money, and changing lifestyle, to engaging in the use of subversive and illegal tactics in order to further a particular cause and hinder the operations of a target. This research investigates persuasive discourse in activist websites and examines the following questions:

- How have activists used the Internet historically and how do they use it today?
- What elements distinguish various types of activist websites?
- How do activist websites use persona to persuade users?
- Does the presumed intended purpose of activist websites influence the activity level or perceived presence of the rhetorical persona?

Answers to these questions will contribute to our knowledge of activist web sites in terms of generic forms and the digital rhetor in terms of persona. We will gain insight about activist

digital discourse, specifically, which we will be able to apply to digital discourse in other communities and for other purposes.

When B.J. Fogg et al. conducted their large-scale study of credibility issues in websites, the authors looked at NGOs in general but paid little attention to activist websites in particular. Even more important, Stephen Greenblatt resonates my own sentiments (and the sentiments of many) when he examines Durer's woodcuts that revealed the artist's ambivalence toward the institutions that repressed the peasants, claiming there may have been on Durer's part:

...A secret, subversive sympathy with the vanquished encoded at the very pinnacle of the victor's monument. I do not think we can rule out this possibility, one that satisfies a perennial longing since Romanticism to discover that all great artists have allied themselves, if only indirectly or unconsciously, with the oppressed and revolutionary masses. (Greenblatt 11)

As technical communicators shift our focus from a positivist approach to one more grounded in social construction, we include minority voices in a community's discourse. In addition, we cheer when those voices are heard, acknowledged, and heeded by others in the community.

Background

Few researchers have examined the Internet's influence on activists, sympathizers, and nonactivists (Faulkner 79) and reliable statistics about the nature of collective action on the net are scant (Brunsting and Postmes 526). Thus, for technical communicators, there exists the

opportunity to discover new insights about how technology—specifically the Web—motivates us to respond. The Internet changes the nature of collective action, crossing barriers of distance, cost, censorship, and personal risk. The ability to elicit response from website visitors, ideally to form and participate in a Net movement, involves creating the desire in the website visitor to respond to a challenge of values, to want to be a part of a collective identity, to then network, and to ultimately mobilize.

Information and mobilization are key purposes of activist websites and information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate participation in political and social action. According to Edward Schwarz, activist organizations can use websites and other digital genres to improve our communities and gain influence in politics (17). He suggests that groups who are after a Net presence know their purpose and what they hope to gain from that presence, including information dissemination, conversation, membership, and movement support in terms of money and action (100).

In contrast, findings by Brunsting and Postmes (526) indicate that although a slight increase in activism results from online engagement as opposed to offline efforts, the most interesting finding is that the Internet increases the level of participation of peripheral sympathizers (nonactivists) significantly. They conclude that although sites garner more exposure for organizations and causes, the ability to motivate the website audience to action may be more diffuse than it would be in another medium (552). In addition, the *UCLA Internet Project Report* indicates that the proportion of Net activists who consider themselves able to

affect change by means of the Internet has decreased since 2002 (80). Whether or not an increased number of peripheral sympathizers will influence the beliefs of activists who perceive the Internet as a less effective change agent than originally thought may not be a significant concern for activist-website designers because of the various goals and purposes of the activist organizations and their websites. For example, environmental activist groups have goals that range from encouraging people to enjoy wilderness areas (www.sierraclub.org) to advocating the large-scale destruction of developments under construction (www.earthliberationfront.com). In order to assess the effectiveness of digital activism, we must understand that different types of activist sites have different value systems; some sites welcome peripheral sympathizers while other sites demand the participation of only those very committed to a given cause. We must therefore somehow differentiate among activist sites to best understand how they use genre and persona to further their goals by reaching and influencing site visitors.

Classifying Activist Organizations

In his early work Philip Kotler, a renowned economist and expert in international marketing, examined peace movements, environment groups, social-justice advocates, and civil-rights issues. He identified five elements that were common to all social action (188) as the five Cs of social action: *cause*, a social objective or undertaking that change agents believe will provide an answer to a social problem; *change agency*, an organization whose primary mission is

to advance a social cause; *change targets*, individuals, groups, or institutions designated as the targets of change efforts; *channels*, ways in which influence and response can be transmitted between change agents and change targets; and *change strategy*, a basic model of influence adopted by the change agent to affect the change target (Kotler 172). These five Cs are also either implied or specifically identifiable in terms of Kenneth Burke's dramatism theory—scene, agent, agency, act, and purpose—and in some ways parallel the framework of Burke's pentad (*Grammar* xv-xxiii).

Kotler divides causes (173) into three categories: *helping causes*, which address a perceived social problem and assists the victim of the problem without addressing the origin of the problem; *protest causes*, which attempt to change an institution that is perceived to contribute to a problem; or *revolutionary causes*, which try to eliminate an institution that is perceived as the problem. These categories are reminiscent of Burke's consideration of programs and forms (*C-S* 107-122), in which he explains ratios of attitudes and emotions that should be stressed in terms of certain institutions. Because of the virtual nature of the Internet, we can easily ascribe Kotler's classification of activist organizations to activist websites.

For this research, I chose six social-action websites that address environmental issues and animal rights and categorized them in Kotler's terms (173). I classified the websites of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), www.hsus.org, and the Sierra Club, www.sierraclub.org, as helping sites. The activities common to the helping sites include education of the user/reader, donation solicitation, lobbying by means of electronic letters and

email, and direct personal action such as boycotting or purchasing products depending upon the user's relationship with the sites. These helping websites encourage the user to address the needs of the victims of the particular problem but do not advocate direct action against a given institution; instead the helping websites want to cultivate informed website users willing to donate and volunteer. The activities of the protest sites, PETA (www.peta.org) and Greenpeace USA (www.greenpeaceusa.org), include education, solicitation, lobbying, direct personal action, and civil disobedience. These protest sites encourage activists to take their action further than the helping sites, but avoid supporting action that would result in long prison sentences. In contrast, the revolutionary sites I examined, Animal Liberation Front (www.animalliberationfront.net) and Earth Liberation Front (www.earthliberationfront.com) ignore the education and lobbying component of activist-site elements and instead encourage illegal activities that would result in damage to or elimination of institutions that contribute to the problem. The sites I chose and the classifications I assigned them are described in Table 1.

A History of Activist Organizations and the Net

In 1969, the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) created the ARPANET for the purpose of civil-defense communications. Our present-day Internet evolved from the ARPANET's initial four nodes that had no public access to a Web that boasts an estimated 256 million separate websites. Some experts claim that the Internet will prove to be an incredible tool for bringing about huge advances in democracy and representation for all while other experts

believe it has already fallen far short of that goal, especially in accommodating accessibility issues of the disenfranchised in the United States (Schmitz 80-101).

Significant tensions have always existed between power holders and ordinary citizens when government and corporate concerns intersect (Li 12). The less powerful citizens frequently align themselves or join others with similar sentiments in order to increase their influence. The Internet has made activist groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) more readily available to many people because activist and NGO websites provide a vehicle by which people can debate issues of power and accountability with both governmental agencies and corporations.

Just as the Internet has grown phenomenally, since the late 1980s the number of activist organizations has increased at a far more rapid pace than the number of either businesses or governmental agencies (Li 14). Activist organizations have proven to be skilled in global grassroots communication and, according to some, “are masterful manipulators of the media” (Li 14). According to Gina Li, it is through their appeals to emotion that activist organizations mobilize public opinion and damage the reputations of corporations worldwide (14).

For many years, corporations and governmental agencies trailed NGOs in Internet expertise, especially in use of email for communication purposes. For example, corporations would post their annual reports and other standard printed material on the Internet without modifying the design of the content for a different medium or the resulting wider audience. Specifically, the first- and second-generation digital designers responsible for posting often

ignored the Web's interactive qualities, which make it possible to receive messages from users in addition to transmitting them—ironic for groups so interested in marketing. This collective lack of imagination resulted in lost commercial opportunities.

In addition, when corporations failed to respond to the debates put forth by activist groups, website users who searched for the dialectic—the debate—between activist organizations and institutions found themselves paying more attention to the activist organizations because corporations and corporate sites often refused to acknowledge or respond to activist-group challenges. When corporations forfeited the opportunity to put forward their points of view on the Internet, ignored controversial issues on their websites, or answered defensively, visitors concluded that those corporations were remote, uncaring, and arrogant. Only recently have corporations increased their expertise in this regard.

When organizations or corporations targeted by activist groups find it difficult to put forth arguments that refute allegations launched against them as untrue, most companies traditionally choose to take the “high road,” and ignore rather than respond to accusations. This tactic backfired for Monsanto Corporation when Greenpeace launched a campaign against Monsanto's biotechnology and genetically engineered crops after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) proclaimed bioengineered crops to be safe (Li 13). Greenpeace enlisted scientific researchers who found a fragment of DNA in Monsanto's Roundup Ready soya, which contradicted reports by the United States FDA. Greenpeace argued that the DNA fragment, previously unreported by Monsanto's scientists, represented an unanticipated risk in terms of

health consequences and Greenpeace activists urged the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, and other countries to prohibit the sale of Monsanto's genetically engineered products based partially on the argument that the effects of the unknown gene sequence could not be determined and might result in untold ramifications. Monsanto initially responded that the company stood behind its earlier assessment of the product yet did not dispute the Greenpeace claim of a DNA fragment. Monsanto has since played catch-up to claims about genetically engineered crops, losing market share in much of Europe, Canada, and most recently in the United States. According to the Greenpeace website, Monsanto has voluntarily dropped its development of Roundup Ready wheat ("Monsanto Drops"). If Monsanto had not ignored the initial accusations which were posted on Greenpeace's website and disseminated to activists and media outlets, the decisions made about Roundup Ready crops might have been different.

John Bray asserts that the technology itself does not change the quality or character of the arguments presented by either side; rather, because information about any given issue or cause is now more easily distributed to a larger, less homogenous audience than might be found in a particular geographical location or on a specific interest group's mail list, the Internet changes the balance of power among NGOs, corporate entities, and government agencies (115-116). Although many smaller local NGOs have limited access to technology, NGOs and activist groups that have Internet availability influence the outcomes of numerous causes (Bray 116).

The Internet reflects the nonhierarchical and fluid structure of many nongovernmental organizations and offers a metaphor of empowerment for people on the receiving end of policies

to assert themselves and influence or change policies both collectively and individually (Pickerill 366). ICTs facilitate activities on the Web in obvious ways: electronic dissemination of the message costs far less and reaches both sympathizers and potential sympathizers who casually search the Net in addition to those activists already identified by organizations. However, because of the Internet's anarchic nature, there is no gatekeeper or mediator of communication, which sometimes results in the posting of either offensive or mundane information that appears to have the same weight as significant discourse.

The Internet provides rich sources of information on a number of issues affecting us worldwide. NGOs, governments, and companies, in addition to individuals, have the opportunity to discuss issues ranging from the most dangerous traffic intersection in a given community to international affairs by means of websites. Activist campaign groups, pressure groups, governments, and multinational corporations all have the opportunity to participate and debate.

One reason that the Internet has become such a popular activist tool is the immediacy of information dissemination and its ability to reach many divergent groups. The Internet is a powerful instrument for reaching people because the audience has an opportunity to respond to an appeal immediately by sending emails, donating funds, and passing along information to others in their particular communities without ever leaving the keyboard. Web pages provide NGOs with a portal through which they can advertise their own existence, explain their arguments, and recruit new members—all of which can be accomplished with a minimum commitment of funds sufficient to cover the cost of a computer, T-1 line, initial website design, site

maintenance, and hosting. Video and still images, sound, and text are all available to the knowledgeable activist-website designer (Bray 117).

The Internet makes it easier to both advertise and coordinate campaigns. Organizers can more readily garner petition signatures, share information between allied groups and their supporters, and fund candidacies. Activists, armed with email lists and other resources, can communicate quickly with other activists and also the corporations and government agencies that they target. Email enables disparate groups of activists to organize. For example, Greenpeace maintains an email list of more than 5,000 activists who are prepared to protest any number of issues (Li 12).

Information dissemination enables activist groups to quickly mobilize for boycotts, to assemble, and to conduct new kinds of campaigning such as electronic direct action (EDA), the equivalent of electronic sit-ins and graffiti-writing. Technology enables single users to send floods of email messages, in some cases from preprogrammed computers, in order to cause the recipients' computers to crash. In this way, the social-movement tactics of trespass and blockade have been moved to the Internet, where "the revolution will be digitalized" (Bray 119).

Examples of Effective Internet Activism

The Internet is invaluable to activist organizations in terms of mobilization. It provides a gateway to activities, raises the profiles of group campaigns, stimulates local activism, mobilizes online activism, attracts participants, promotes networking, and boosts solidarity with other

activist sites. For example, Greenpeace, Waveland, MoveOn, and many other NGO websites frequently contain links that invite website users to visit the virtual homes of other organizations interested in similar issues (Bray 118).

Patricia Wallace (105) looked at the Internet grassroots movements that mobilized more than 20 campus-based protests against California's 1994 anti-immigration measures, including a single march in San Francisco in which more than 2000 people participated. In addition, information about 1989's Tienanmen Square massacre was first available and disseminated by means of the Internet (Wallace 105). After the Tienanmen Square massacre, an organized group of Chinese students in the United States successfully used email as a lobby tool to persuade Congress to write and pass legislation that protected them from reprisals by China for their support of the student rebellion (Schwarz 10).

Activists have discovered a number of unusual methods of digital protest and support for political candidates. One effective means of Net civil disobedience is the barraging of mailrooms and email servers with nuisance emails. MoveOn.org, an online activist organization founded in 1998 for the purposes of censuring Bill Clinton, now has over 2,000,000 members ("Frequently Asked Questions") and examines a myriad of issues from campaign financing and reform to outsourcing. In the area of candidate support, Howard Dean's political campaign for the Democratic nomination for the presidency is an excellent example of the Internet as a campaign fundraising tool: more than half of the money donated to Dean's campaign from its inception to July of 2003 (5 of 7 million dollars) came over the Internet ("Dean Taps Internet").

Among activist organizations, Greenpeace has consistently demonstrated acumen for optimizing its use of the Internet. When six Greenpeace activists conducted a six-day protest on the Piz Buin glacier in the Australian Alps to draw attention to the problem of global warming, the Greenpeace UK website broadcast their activities live (Bray 119). Through Waveland, a borderless virtual country situated on the World Wide Web, Greenpeace invites site visitors to become “cyber activists,” to join their mailing lists, and to become virtual citizens (“The Global State of Waveland”).

The Rainforest Action Network once encouraged website visitors to get in touch with their inner poets and send haiku to the president of Mitsubishi to protest the company’s timber harvesting practices. Thus, the group imaginatively avoided the problem of redundancy in their letter-writing campaign. Since the completion of that campaign, the Rainforest Action Network has added the haiku exercise to its *Rainforest Action Network Teacher’s Guide*, the purpose of which is to educate elementary-school children about the importance of the rainforest specifically and the environment in general (“Rainforest Poetry”).

Digital ecotage, the virtual version of ecoterrorism, provides activists avenues for making others aware of perceived issues and hinders the operations of established targets (Chadwick 22). In 1998, British and Dutch students broke into the website of India’s major nuclear center and imposed the image of a mushroom-shaped cloud over the home page. In a separate instance, activists hacked into an Indian government website promoting tourism in Kashmir, displayed the phrase “Save Kashmir” on the home page, and posted images of alleged victims of the Indian

army's Kashmir counter-insurgency campaign. Companies, research laboratories, and certain industries are also at risk from the same sort of direct action.

Bray cites a number of examples of corporations that have increased their public-relations skills with regard to the potential of the Internet. From mining to money, corporate sites show increasingly their ability to avoid responding to specific activist challenges based often on environmental and ethical concerns and instead deflect the discussion and emphasize their contributions to a community based often on increased jobs and potential civil infrastructure improvements.

For many years, activists have criticized Freeport McMoRan, a US-based mining company, with a mine in Grasberg, Irian Jaya, Indonesia. The mine, one of the world's largest, is located in what was once a remote highland region. Because of the negative publicity generated about the environmental repercussions and social impact of the mines on indigenous peoples, Freeport had to acknowledge problems and defend itself on its website. In an effort to be magnanimous, Freeport included an excerpt from an independent social audit that called for the company to demonstrate greater vision and drive in social and cultural development. But the tone of this Freeport site was abrasive because Freeport labeled people who disagreed with the company "anti-mining activists," name calling that had nothing to do with the issue the activists tried to address.

Over time, Freeport's response to accusations changed. Freeport's website (www.fcx.com) has undergone an unparalleled transformation since its original response to the

activists; as of May 2004, the site has nine hotlinks to areas that address environmental and social programs—more hotlinks on their website to additional information about a single subject than any other subheading, including their “Annual Report” and “To Our Shareholders” website subheadings.

Monsanto Pharmaceutical Company also recognizes the need to either anticipate activist charges or respond adequately, especially when it comes to negative perceptions of bio-engineered foods. Monsanto spends more than a billion dollars a year on its genetically modified crops research. In anticipation of the resistance to biotechnology that the corporation knows exists, Monsanto at one time provided links to critics such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Iceland supermarket chain—all of which oppose genetically modified food (Bray 120). A recent visit to the site revealed that Monsanto has dropped the quick links to its opposition, and instead now sports press releases which publicize the company’s victories in court against patent infringement and its successes in achieving approval of the United States FDA and Agriculture Departments for genetically modified crops (“Monsanto Files”). Monsanto’s mission statement is prominent on its home page www.monsanto.com : “Monsanto Company is a leading global provider of technology-based solutions and agricultural products that improve farm productivity and food quality.”

One of the observations that Bray (120) made about Monsanto’s earlier website remains consistent with the Monsanto website I visited on 21 June 2004: “there is no substantive discussion of the potential risks to consumers of bio-technology innovation” (120). Monsanto

uses a tactic similar to Freeport's: diverting discussion and avoiding the concerns that activists raise.

In addition to challenging corporate policies directly, activists use the Internet to encourage sympathizers to boycott goods; through letter writing and email campaigns they pressure cities and states to introduce selective purchasing legislation, encouraging city administrations and state agencies to refuse to do business with companies that operate in offending countries (Bray 122). An excellent historical example of this is the boycott against South African goods during apartheid; a more recent example is the current activist boycott against Israeli goods and services in protest of the treatment of Palestinians.

The impact of activist pressure varies according to the industry in which specific companies operate and their country of origin. Companies that produce consumer goods are much more susceptible to pressure than those in the petroleum sector, however even petroleum companies are sometimes successfully targeted by activist groups.

For example, in 1995, Greenpeace attacked Royal Dutch Shell because the corporation planned to dispose of an offshore platform by sinking it. At the same time, human-rights organizations charged that Royal Dutch Shell had been in collusion with the Nigerian regime that had executed a dissident leader from the oil-producing region of Ogoniland. Shell garnered considerable negative publicity on the Greenpeace website ("10th November 1996"), including an accusation that the weapons used by the Nigerian police to murder dissidents were provided by the petroleum corporation. Greenpeace's accusations forced Shell to change some of its business

practices. Today, Shell anticipates and addresses potential controversies with a “TellShell” feature [formerly the “Shell Ballot Box” (Bray 121)] on the website, which encourages visitors to either email the company with their concerns or participate in open forums. Feedback from readers may not change the way corporations do business but may defuse controversy and persuade the reader that concerns are being addressed.

In conjunction with *The Economist* magazine, Shell continues its image-enhancement campaign as a civic-minded public citizen with a yearly essay contest worth up to \$65,000 to the winners. The 2004 topic is “Import workers or export jobs?” and the judging panel consists of an editor from *The Economist* and an executive from Shell (“Import”).

Activist groups affect companies directly when their campaigns focus specifically on a company’s own activities and indirectly when they lobby governments about proposed new legislation or international treaties. Net activists can coordinate campaigns that involve several hundred groups from around the world. Using the Internet, activists recently spotlighted the role of transnational corporations in the global economy. The NGO campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) used the Internet to broadcast that the proposed agreement was heavily weighted toward the needs of investors, gave little attention to the need for adequate environmental safeguards, and permitted countries to override government environmental regulations. In addition to posting arguments against the MAI, activists announced when and where proponents of the MAI were scheduled to meet and then organized real-world and virtual acts of protest and civil disobedience. The NGO campaign against the MAI was significant

because of its international scope, which would not have been possible without the Internet (Bray 128).

Strategy Drawbacks

Some of the drawbacks to Net activism reflect issues similar to those that activists must face in “nonvirtual” communities. Minority groups, people with lower socio-economic status, and both nonwhite and female activists have less access to the Internet and are underrepresented in digital communities (Pickerill 365-366). Thus dissenters may be readily heard in their activist groups, but their voices are suppressed online because little more than half of all U.S. households have Internet connections (Gonsalves).

A frequent criticism of activist-campaign rhetoric is that website viewers see activist campaigns as negative because “they look at stopping something rather than pursuing solutions to problems” (Bray 128). Activist campaigns try to prevent people and corporations from behaving in a particular manner more frequently than they encourage people and corporations to behave in a particular manner. Another problem specific to digital environmental activism is the hypocrisy that peripheral activists and potential sympathizers see because environmentalists must use computers and electronics to address environmental issues even though one of the commonplaces of technology is that high-tech electronics contribute significantly to environmental damage. Environmental activists find themselves faced with the paradox of being forced to use technology that results in extensive environmental and social costs: many of these

consequences occur in countries where high-tech industries that pollute are encouraged to operate and the health ramifications are minimized, resulting in tragedies such as that which occurred with Union Carbide/Dow in Bhopal, India, in 1984. In some instances, ethical choices keep activist organizations from having a Net presence; activists will sometimes refuse to use the technology (Pickerill 365) that would most easily enable them to communicate about particular issues because of the environmental and social costs. Neo-luddite groups have little Net presence because of their resistance to technology of any kind.

Activists also face an increased probability of online surveillance (Pickerell 365) and law-enforcement agencies regularly employ high-technology equipment originally developed for military and state-security scenarios to quell digital civil unrest. In addition to overall increased monitoring of Net behavior, local, national, and multinational law-enforcement and intelligence agencies can now share information about activist groups and plans on an international scale (Pickerill 366).

Corporations have seen the power of the Internet to enhance activist campaigns and they more frequently practice a similar and more prevalent presence on the Net in order to influence regulatory policies and practices and counter the influence of Net activists. The Internet, once the virtual metaphor for the Wild Wild West, currently tangles activists, users, corporate interests, and others in a web of documentation and legalese (Pickerill 368). Last year, Dow Chemical pressured Verio, an Internet access provider, to shut down Thing.net, a service provider for arts and activist organizations, because of an activist group's posting. On the 18th anniversary of the

toxic gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, a group of activists posted a spoof site purportedly by Dow (which now owns Union Carbide) explaining that Dow would not clean up the disaster site nor would it help the hundreds of thousands of people still suffering health problems from the aftermath of the tragedy. The conflict never went to court; Verio complied with Dow's demand that the entire network be shut down, leaving 256 IP addresses no longer valid. In other words, "Control the infrastructure and you control the Web" (Carr para. 7).

Because of the convenience of the Internet, letter-writing campaigns have become both more and less effective. Since letters can be sent to corporations and governmental entities by means of direct link from the websites to the email addresses or fax addresses of targets, and because the letters are already composed, activist groups bombard recipients with the same information from many camps and, in some instances, the credibility of the writers and the information becomes suspect. In terms of sheer quantity, activist targets barraged by email (which requires little effort to send), often attribute less credence to digital letters than letters sent by means of snail mail.

One problem with online civil disobedience is that protest avenues are limited to tactics that involve "hacktivism," an activity that many social activists avoid because of credibility issues and the ethics involved in breaching Netiquette (Pickerill 368).

Conclusion

Innovative communications technologies enable activists and activist groups to coordinate their activities more effectively than ever before. The balance of power among established institutions—often the targets of activist groups, activist organizations, and potential sympathizers has shifted, changing the dynamics of activist discourse. Technical communicators who understand the dynamics of discourse among activist-organization websites, activist targets, and both sympathizers and casual site visitors will be able to anticipate trends, respond effectively by means of existing digital forms, and perhaps create forms for new content. Chapter 2 examines common elements in the digital genres of activist discourse.

Table 1. Social-action websites classified using Kotler's categories.

Site Name	Classification	Characteristics
Humane Society of the United States (www.hsus.org)	Helping	Educate the user/reader, solicit donations, lobby, direct personal action
Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org)		
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (www.PETA.org)	Protest	Educate, solicit, lobby, encourage direct personal action, perform acts of civil disobedience
Greenpeace USA www.greenpeaceusa.org		
Earth Liberation Front (www.elf.net)	Revolutionary	Advocate acts of civil disobedience and illegal activities to damage protest targets
Animal Liberation Front (www.alf.net)		

CHAPTER 2: ACTIVIST WEBSITES AS DIGITAL GENRE

Introduction

As Chapter 1 establishes, activist movements and organizations were among the first entities to effectively seize upon the discourse potential of the Internet and the World Wide Web while corporations, governmental agencies, and mainstream nongovernmental organizations trailed behind. From bulletin boards to mass emailings, from calls to action to websites that disseminate information about targets and causes, activist groups have mastered the potential of digital communications and have positioned themselves at the forefront of the design of digital documents that inform and mobilize users. As communicators continue our exodus from the print-based world to one steeped in impermanent pixels, we find ourselves faced with the need to effectively determine how we will use this incredible medium to most effectively communicate with others.

According to Carolyn Miller, genres are the point of connection between intention and effect; they are social action (153). Genres shape situations and people's actions, orienting writers to the community's discourse requirements and providing audiences the tools to make sense of texts (Geisler et al. 277). Charles Bazerman says the way that we present our communication influences our organizations, our actions, and our social relations (296). For every given discourse community, including activist communities, certain terms, representations, images, and rhetorical and structural markers combine repeatedly to comprise unique digital

genres specific to that discipline. In this chapter, we will look more closely at the common elements and forms that comprise the genre of activist websites.

The Nature of Genres

Until recently, the phenomenon of genre formation spanned generations and changed slowly (Dillon 202). However, because technologies continue to evolve rapidly, digital genres have shorter and shorter lifecycles. Genres change, evolve, and decay, depending on the complexity and diversity of the communities in which they are situated (Miller 163). According to Brian Paltridge (397), genres are dynamic and open to change in response to user needs. The combined needs of communicators and their audiences coupled with cutting-edge technology determine the forms of digital genres.

Experts have yet to define conventions for digital genres and continue to wrestle with the emergence of genre in websites (de Casio and Dyson 165). Currently, digital genres borrow heavily from print-based forms, primarily because print-based formats result in increased user comprehension (Dillon 202). We see evidence of website-designer awareness of visitor preferences when the visitor has the option of accessing website documents in either HTML or PDF format. Dillon contends that by continuing to put print-based documents on the Web, we underutilize the power and potential of electronic technology to provide us with innovative information structures (203). We must balance our use of print-based forms with a willingness to restructure our discourse in such a way that audiences will be cued to the nature of the

communication (Geisler et al. 277). In addition, because digital genres are still evolving and are not necessarily standardized, they run the risk of not being recognized—at all—by the user (Paltridge 397). Technical communicators must move forward with the identification of common forms and elements to establish conventions for digital genres. As we see recurring examples of innovative digital forms that convey content successfully, we should make a concerted attempt to use those forms when appropriate to convey our own content, which will help to establish digital generic forms whose purpose is recognizable by website visitors.

Maria Gonzales deCasio and Mary C. Dyson (166) suggest that some authors emphasize form over content in digital texts because users easily recognize the physical characteristics of a particular form; without prior experience with a similar form, the reader would have to read the entire document to recognize the genre. We can examine collections of related website pages that are comprised of various digital forms and elements. If we discover certain similarities among examples of related website pages and identify recurrent elements, rules of form, and content, we can consider whether or not they constitute a unique digital discourse genre. This chapter looks at activist sites as a digital genre.

Common Activist Website Elements

The six activist websites that I looked at, www.sierraclub.org, www.hsus.org, www.greenpeaceusa.org, www.PETA.org, www.earthliberationfront.com, and www.animalliberationfront.net, had a number of common elements in terms of links, which

indicated what was important to each organization represented and which separated the organizations from other types of websites.

Common elements on all sites were a mission statement, purpose and history link, activist instructions which ranged from how to write letters (posted on the helping sites) to how to construct and place incendiary devices for the purposes of demolishing a building (posted on the revolutionary sites), and events reporting. All sites had information about how to participate in the movements: helping and protest sites had “Join” and “Donate” options while the revolutionary sites stated that it was not possible to connect ALF and ELF sympathizers because of the nature of the activities and because all action was carried out by individual “cells” in secrecy. Traditionally, activist organizations reached sympathizers with print documents; many of these activist sites and the sites I examined are transitioning to electronic texts for which there are few PDF equivalents.

Each of the six sites took advantage of the digital nature of websites and the opportunities to display content in versatile media; the Sierra Club posted a stunning series of Ansel Adams photographs, the Humane Society has Animal Channel shorts, Greenpeace uses multi-media slides, real-time films, and 360-degree views of offices, tours of their protest boats, and animated visuals. PETA’s site boasts dozens of PSAs, undercover video, and multimedia images. The ELF site first used images of recent ecotage as the gateway to the site’s home page, then used hypertext features for the subsequent pages (few images, yet competent use of white space, good chunking of text hyperlinked to additional pages, and hotlinks that worked with categories).

The ALF site lacks depth, but its web designers had undercover footage of a mink-farm raid and photographs of ALF activists raiding an alleged puppy mill.

All sites reported their successes; for the helping and protest sites these successes were recounted in terms of their influence in the changing of laws, the punishment or censure of violators, and the resolution of issues involving specific victims and potential future controversy. In terms of both the ELF and the ALF, these victories had nothing to do with either legislative or corporate policy change; for those revolutionary sites, victory resulted when ELF and ALF activists hindered businesses from conducting legal business.

In looking in what happened with each site over time, I observed some interesting changes in emphasis in site transitions. For example, an April 2004 visit to www.greenpeace.org revealed biographies, resumes, and photos of the activist group's top representatives, from its executive director to its high-level scientific staff. As of 20 June 2004, the information available about the activist group's leadership included one- to two-paragraph biographical descriptions of the executive director and a couple of key people; images and subject-matter expert material was no longer available on the site (although an image of John Passacantando, Greenpeace USA's executive director, could be found in the 2002 annual report—the most recent annual report available as of 24 June 2004). This change in site information may be in response to a concern that some of the controversial stances that Greenpeace assumes may put its leaders either in danger of personal harm or harassment.

The most telling data about these activist websites dealt with outreach to visitors. Although every helping, protest, and revolutionary site reported events after they had occurred, only the helping and protest sites broadcast upcoming online and real-world events, in addition to regional, national, and international gatherings (PETA's Running of the Nudes in Pamplona has been prominently featured on their site since April; the event occurs in July). As far as income generation and cause-affiliated products available for sale, again, only the helping and protest sites made those available to site visitors. In addition, revolutionary websites have no outlet for visitor donations, except to provide the address of a legal defense fund to which visitors can send donations for activists who have been accused and imprisoned for illegal actions in the name of the cause.

Visitors could readily contact four of the six sites—all of which were either helping or protest. Again, the only possible contact that site visitors could have with either the ELF or the ALF was through a digital pressroom, where the visitors might report their own subversive actions. Neither revolutionary site advertised or sold any cause-affiliated paraphernalia. The closest thing to a revolutionary-site income-generating scheme occurred on the ALF site, which recommended visitors buy a number of different books—books which were not available through the site. The ELF link to the library was broken and that site's single appeal was for prisoner support. In some ways, the revolutionary activist sites are similar to the corporate sites of a decade ago—the designers of revolutionary sites do not take full advantage of the design the potential of the media and thus do not use the Internet to their fullest advantage.

Activist websites constitute a particular genre, separate from commercial websites or personal home pages, based on a number of factors, most of which are inherently subjective yet obvious. Most obvious, the activist websites I studied do not have the equivalent of a digital shopping cart, although the Humane Society's appeal for sympathizers to sign up for the HSUS VISA card comes close to crossing that boundary. The links of an activist site differ considerably from those of a commercial site. Activist sites tell visitors who their organizations and their members are and describe their history, hence the common "About Us," "History," and "What is..." links that describe the activist organizations and their traditions. Most commercial sites do not bother with images of their CEOs but, until Greenpeace removed theirs some time in June of 2004, four of the six activist sites prominently featured profiles and photographs of their organization's representatives on their web pages.

Private industry must avoid some of the features that distinguish activist sites from other sites. For example, although it is perfectly acceptable for an activist site to boast about a legislative success, for a business to breathe a sigh of relief on its website at either avoiding litigation or gaining a victory in the courts might offend consumers. In addition, activist sites can offer to send visitors issues of online newsletters; visitors to business websites might be reluctant to sign up for a similar newsletter, assuming it would be little more than a disguised catalog. Activist sites can urge their visitors to voice criticism or support for a third party, either a target or a sympathetic entity; business sites urge their visitors to buy their products.

Activist websites differ significantly from business websites; they serve different purposes and are a separate digital genre. Table 2 is a comparison of some of the elements common to the six activist websites studied in this thesis and an overview of the information available from a perusal of the home pages of the helping, protest, and activist sites.

Digital Genre Dilemmas

Miller establishes that the genre is the point of connection between intention and effect, in other words, social action (153). Kristin Walker agrees, but asserts that as we transition from print-based rhetorical genres to digital, the convergence of ideas and technologies results in genres that evolve in response to technologies (65). If genres change in response to technologies, the consideration that form follows function follows content no longer holds completely true.

Genre theorists agree that pragmatics drive much of the progression and design of genre. The structural elements of genre become established over time because they meet needs that are specific to the genre, such as a return address on a business letter or a masthead on a weekly newspaper. These conventions are not rigid, however they fulfill a purpose. Miller emphasizes the importance of the pragmatic—the “homely genres”—such as instructions and memos (155), also called the “applied art” (as opposed to the “fine arts”) by Salome Schmid-Isler (1).

Each text is an instance of a genre influenced by audience need and these genres can (and should) be modified according to text circumstances. Genre conventions reveal the norms and ideologies of the particular discourse community and reflect gender, difference, and identity

issues (Paltridge 400). Genre study is important because it provides us the opportunity to examine, especially in the less-hierarchical nature of the Web, minority voices.

Genres grow as the social situations that produce them change. They have identifiable elements, subunits, rules, forms, and content (Dillon 202). Conforming to genre conventions enhances discourse memorability and leads to greater user satisfaction (Dillon 202). Over time, true genre conventions cross into other discourse communities to support the communication of ideas and information. This is evidenced by the way that a number of companies changed their websites to better use rhetorical principles in order to counteract the persuasive challenges of nongovernmental organizations (see Chapter 1).

Authors admit that even though the digitization of communication results in digital products, the difficulty remains in defining what actually constitutes digital genre (Dillon 202, Schmid-Isler 1). In many cases, we can identify the purpose of the digital document because it uses printed-based conventions, but some authors do not consider these documents truly digital (deCasio and Dyson 176). The information structure for digital documents remains unclear; there are a variety of ways to organize websites, and navigation through websites is often unclear. Users can read through some sites quickly while other dense sites require a thorough read. In addition, website dimensions are often unapparent, leaving users to navigate through the sites in order to determine the number of levels or depth of a given site. Dillon stresses that the hypermedia user's success with web orientation and navigation is contingent upon that user's

perception of the rules in information space, and the lack of conventions in the digital world is a potential source of user difficulty.

Salome Schmid-Isler defines digital genre by its purpose or *function*, considering the commonplace for genre that form follows function and function follows content; in that way, he differentiates the applied art of genre from the fine arts (1). Walker postulates that social processes may be causing the unique and variable website genre to evolve over time with particular features, similar to speech genres, based on the needs of the creators and users of the genres (67). Just as consumers are increasingly involved in the design of products, Schmid-Isler contends that site visitors, users of the digital genre, are increasingly involved in the forms of that digital genre (7). Because technological genres evolve rapidly to meet the changing needs of their users, digital documents have changed so rapidly that genre definition of the new medium has been challenging.

Truly digital documents (that do not have a print-based counterpart) have undergone a number of style phases. The first web pages had a gray background with a linear top-to-bottom and left-to-right hierarchy, accompanied by line spaces, bullets, and horizontal rules. Second-phase digital documents added icons, tiled images, banners, buttons, and blinking words. Third-generation web documents began the process of pulling users through the metaphors and models of consumer psychology and fourth-generation digital documents include database architecture and dynamic content (Schmid-Isler 4-5).

We can expect digital genres to continue to evolve for a number of reasons. A dialog occurs between the activist site and the site user; in the case of the activist websites, the dialog often requires a response from either the site visitor or a third party—representatives of the corporation or industry that the activist site targets. In some cases, the site user will enter a dialog with the activist-site target, expressing support for the activist cause, disapproval of proposed legislation, or admonishment for an action already taken. This expanded dialogue exchange leads us from seeing activist sites through the lens of genre theory and moves us toward examining digital activist discourse in terms of intertextuality. Chapter 3 examines the communication among the activist website, the site visitor, and possible target websites in terms of the persona that the activist site assumes.

As we move toward a specific definition of activist websites, we look for the relationship between form and content elements, which define the effectiveness of the website and its ability to identify itself with the audience (Walker 67). The increasing complexity of the work, paperwork, and technology in our discourse communities is reflected in the styles, genres, and systems of genres that we use in websites (MacDonald 633). There is a functional recognition of the importance of the chosen genre in terms of style. Site style reveals considerable information about the organization and designer behind the website, and shows the website author's *dialectical peculiarity* and purpose or function (Schmid-Isler 6).

Genre theory promotes the analysis of discipline-specific discourse and the community it represents (Walker 65); thus creators can analyze sites that already exist and incorporate those

elements into future sites. It is through the relationship between the creator and user of the website genres that the genres evolve dynamically to meet the needs of the designer and the user—even though those needs are dissimilar. For example, in the case of an advertising website, the designer creates the site because the website owner needs to sell a product that the website visitor needs to purchase.

Walker emphasizes that “situated cognition” affects the ability of communicators and audiences to understand and respond to texts within the social framework (66). In addition, diCasio and Dyson postulate that the evolution of the genre results from collective understanding and a “large-scale typification” of a rhetorical action, leaving the text to be as transparent as possible (Geisler et al. 285). Cheryl Geisler et al. proceed to explain that communication increasingly involves selecting, arranging, filtering, and recombining pre-existing information, “symbolic-analytic work” (285-286), all of which are part of activist websites and justify activist websites as a separate genre.

Conclusion

Activists have used the Internet successfully to further their particular issues and causes for a number of years. Activist websites possess a number of distinct forms, no longer print based, that justify their inclusion as forms of a specific genre—the activist genre. In Chapter 3, we will examine the importance of persona as both an element of genre and as a separate means of cueing and persuasion for website visitors.

Table 2. An examination of elements common to the six activist sites.

Website elements	Education		Protest		Revolutionary	
	www.sierraclub.org Sierra Club	www.hsus.org Humane Society	www.greenpeaceusa.org Greenpeace USA	www.PETA.org PETA	www.earthliberationfront.com Earth Lib. Front	www.animalliberationfront.net Animal Lib. Front
Mission	“Explore, enjoy, and protect the planet.”	“Promoting the protection of all animals”	“Greenpeace is the leading independent campaigning organization that uses non-violent direct action and creative communication to expose global environmental problems and to promote solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future.”	“Animals are not ours to use—for food, clothing, entertainment, or experimentation, or for any other reason.”	“In defense of all life—you cannot control what is wild.”	“ALF carries out direct action against animal abuse in the form of rescuing animals and causing financial loss to animal exploiters, usually through the damage and destruction of property.”
Org Defined Purpose, History	About Us	History	About Us History, mission	About History, mission	About the ELF	What is ALF? History, mission, philosophy

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Table 2 (cont'd). An examination of elements common to the six activist sites.

Website elements	Education		Protest		Revolutionary	
	www.sierraclub.org Sierra Club	www.hsus.org Humane Society	www.greenpeace.org Greenpeace USA	www.PETA.org PETA	www.earthliberationfront.com Earth Lib. Front	www.animalliberationfront.net Animal Lib. Front
Director	Identified w/image, bio	Identified w/image, bio	Identified w/image, bio	Identified w/image, bio	Not identified	Not identified
Ability to contact?	Contact Us	Contact Us	Contact Us	Contact Us	Contact pressroom	Contact Pressroom
News Stories Alerts, Pending Outcomes, Activity Reports	Inside Sierra Club Press Room	Always	Campaigns	Action Alerts: stories encourage users to email & write to influence outcomes	Subscribe to Frontline News Via email	Subscribe to Frontline News Via email
Victories	Reported	Reported	Reported	Reported	Reported	Reported
Political	Press Room Politics and Issues	Some	Always	Action Alerts Stories, email instructions	Not applicable	Not Applicable
Email Campaigns	Take Action Announces legislative issues	Occasional	Occasional	Action Alerts, Campaigns: animalactivist	Not Applicable	Not Applicable

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Table 2 (cont'd). An examination of elements common to the six activist sites.

Website elements	Education		Protest		Revolutionary	
	www.sierraclub.org Sierra Club	www.hsus.org Humane Society	www.greenpeaceusa.org Greenpeace USA	www.PETA.org PETA	www.earthliberationfront.com Earth Lib. Front	www.animalliberationfront.net Animal Lib. Front
Activist Instructions	Take Action: How to write letters to legislators	Personal action emphasis	Civil disobedience, lobbying, etc.	Activist Toolkit	Extreme action instructions How to build incendiary devices and cause the most damage	Extreme action instructions Step-by-step how to raid a fur farm; how to make a paint bomb
Upcoming Events	Inside Sierra Club	Announced	Announced	Announced	Not broadcast	Not broadcast
Donate/Join	Join or Give	Donate Now	Donate Gift in Honor/memory; Donate to defense fund	Donate Now Membership, donations, bequests	No	No
Income Generators	Get Outdoors Local and national vacation packages Sierra Magazine	Memorials, Planned Gifts	Few	PETA Mall www.PETAmall.com	No	No

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Table 2 (cont'd). An examination of elements common to the six activist sites.

Website elements	Education		Protest		Revolutionary	
	www.sierraclub.org Sierra Club	www.hsus.org Humane Society	www.greenpeaceusa.org Greenpeace USA	www.PETA.org PETA	www.earthliberationfront.com Earth Lib. Front	www.animalliberationfront.net Animal Lib. Front
Cause-affiliated products	Sierra Club Store Backpacks, calendars, stationery, books, camping clothing, accessories	Marketplace Visa, Online Gifts	Not really	www.caring-consumer.com	None	None
Advantageous use of Digital Websites	Stunning photographs by Ansel Adams, others	Animal Channel	Excellent multi-media—slide shows, short “real-time” films, 360-degree views of offices, tour of boats, etc.	PETA tv; undercover video	Contact Jailed Activists; Broadcast names of those that reveal identity of others in exchange for reduced sentences	Support Jailed Activists
General comments about genre	Relatively tame site	Use of celebrities	Documentation of daring events;civ.dis.	Use of Celebrities/Sex; Documentation of daring events; civ.dis.	No video footage; photo of destroyed Telluride chalet; burned out SUV	Video footage of raid on mink farm; poultry farm

CHAPTER THREE: PERSONA AND ADHERENCE ISSUES

User/Viewer/Audience Persona

...if we get drafted to answer users' e-mail, we'll discover that the bland boilerplate response is not enough. Visitors, increasingly, want to know where we live, what our hobbies are, what we think about politics, movies, music, what we feel. My gosh, they want to get to know us. ... Web consumers are pushy, and they are demanding that we put aside our authority, at least occasionally, and act like human beings. Instead of hiding behind fake good cheer, we may have to become deliberately personal. (Price 150)

Persona was once defined as the mask worn by an actor in a Greek tragedy, later considered the public self, and, most recently, defined by Alan Cooper as the model of the user which focuses on the individual's goals when using a particular artifact—be it website, online help, software, or other technically oriented hardware/software (124). Cooper's particular definition relates intimately to usability issues, and often provides designers and developers with the archetypical representation of behavior, goals, and motives of a particular person—a “made-up” person with specific personal traits. This made-up person is part of a design team's discovery process, and the team ascribes the qualities of a particular individual to the persona, from name to profession, to likes and dislikes, to hobbies, personal life, and to socio-economic background. In other words, the persona becomes the person for whom a particular item is designed (A. Cooper 124-126).

According to A. Cooper, users have personality and are driven by personal motives, and we need to look beyond the “elastic user” in order to design for real users. A. Cooper believes that the most effective design tool that the team has is the extensively detailed persona that the design team envisions, from career, to hobbies, to number of children, to color of hair. He also says that the persona is not derived from a process of discovery but rather is a byproduct of the process of discovery (124-125). He defines persona as the “precise description of the user and what he wishes to accomplish” (123).

One cautionary tale about the consequences of mixing implied readers with digital personas is the story of Microsoft’s initial paperclip (Shroyer 239), an intrusive, animated character that monitored the software user’s actions and interrupted the user with offers of help. Digital designers chose to work in terms of their implied users rather than their actual users who, Microsoft discovered based on the increase in the number of customer service complaint calls, despised the paperclip function because the “role” that the Microsoft user was cued to had little to do with the user’s real self (Shroyer 239). The conflict arose because the designers’ implied user was present in the digital cues, but the implied user had no connection with the actual user of the software. This lack of connection between implied and actual user is the biggest drawback to the use of implied persona as an audience tool: if the content provider assumes an implied reader that has little or nothing to do with the real audience, the discrepancy will create frustration, anger, and website mistrust. Users anticipate that their website agents will behave in a manner consistent with their expectations; because Microsoft’s paperclip asserted that the

user/reader needed an intermediary or supervisor, the user was relegated to a subordinate, “childish-user” role, which was inconsistent with the way that users wish to see themselves (239). Although Microsoft’s designers have subdued the role that the animated paperclip agent plays in its Office software by giving users the option to choose whether or not to use the paperclip, Microsoft has yet to banish the clip from a role of agency completely.

Why does Microsoft cling to the clip? Is it because the clip is a necessary agent for dealing with the user or is it because one of the designers considers the clip clever? Often the hardest thing to do is to give our audience what they want...especially when we know what that is but we’ve worked desperately hard to make things so clever that we just cannot quite give up what we (the designer) thinks is appropriate for the website. Roberta Shroyer points out that users choose appropriate goals for themselves and that the paperclip treats readers as passive receivers of information (240), which, however, they are not.

Concerns about whether or not designers can design by means of user persona are becoming more prevalent. Among authors who raise concerns about Cooper’s concept of persona are Asa Blomquist and Mattias Arvola, who observed real-life interactions of designers with personas (197). Blomquist and Arvola observed that the designers did not see the personas as real and, although the personas had names, professional and personal histories, and jobs that would require that they use the information system under development, the designers consistently referred to them as the administrator and the user rather than by the names they were given (200). This indicated that the designers were not comfortable with the users; the users were

superfluous; and the authors' conclusion was that personas cannot be forced: they will not work unless they are a logical extension of the project (200). Allison Head concedes that design teams sometimes construct a persona who is someone other than the technology user; in certain cases the persona constructed might be the person who will ultimately be affected by the information system, such as an Alzheimer's patient persona for a health-care management software system (20). Perfetti, who advocates the use of personas, suggests that design teams design for many users, flying in the face of present-day persona convention which says that two should be sufficient: "By adhering closely to the goals of a specific persona, designers satisfy the needs of the many users who have goals similar to those of the persona. The process is even more effective when designers design for several personas simultaneously."

Cooper concedes that it is best to adjust to the existing circumstances rather than force the use of persona when he says, "The essence of good interaction is devising interactions that let users achieve their practical goals without violating their personal goals" (150). How does this assertion play against Cooper's conception of user persona? For the purposes of this study of activist websites, Cooper's concept of persona is inaccurate, ineffective, and incomplete when technical communicators try to apply it to audiences. Just as Ede and Lunsford (155) asked the question "How can we best define the audience of a written discourse?" we find ourselves now asking, "How can we best define a website's audience?" Although website designers can create sites that might appeal to the audiences that they hope to attract and who will respond appropriately, those designers cannot anticipate who the audiences might be by means of

Cooper's personas. The activist website audience is a shifting reality; past audiences may not be future audiences (Ede and Lunsford 165-166). To design activist sites that persuade, the website persona cannot afford to be a single (or even multiple) made-up user. Rather, the persona that we privilege must be that of the website—the persuader that exists and is revealed within the website—who compels the website visitor to perform in a particular way. Website persona must rely heavily on the concept of “the public self,” the mask that we wear when we interact with an audience—the dramatist's idea of the actor's mask. Just as Cooper's user persona is fictional, so is the activist website persona.

I contacted the web representatives of the six activist sites mentioned in this research to determine whether or not those webmasters and designers use Cooper's concept of persona in their design process. Only PETA's web designer responded. In his email, he explained that PETA does not use personas for site design, but writes the text and chooses the images for different sites based on assumptions about audience. For example, PETA tries to appeal to a number of different socioeconomic and age groups, and their sites are named accordingly. The web designers determined that giving the different interests their own independent main pages made more sense than tying all to the PETA site; thus www.PETAkids.com is geared toward a young audience, www.goveg.com focuses on the advantages of veganism, and www.KFCCruelty.com provides visitors information about the poultry industry—with a pointed attack at the Colonel (N. Cooper, personal communication).

The Public Self: Website Persona

If we reconsider the concept of persona and define it in terms of the digital rhetor rather than the website visitor, then the public self becomes the website persona through which the designer cues the audience to understand the goals, objectives, and purposes of the activist organization. This website persona desires to engage a specific audience in digital discourse—in order to inform, to persuade to a particular point of view, to alter behavior, or even to help people reach compromise agreements so that they might live more harmoniously in their communities. These website personas often come alive for site visitors by means of photographs, videos, and sophisticated graphics. Many websites sport the images and photographs of their founders and directors, their research laboratory leaders, their faculty, and their staffs.

This opportunity to identify with a person beyond the digital screen often makes the audience more responsive to the argument put forth. Price advocates the use of personas as does A. Cooper (Price 148); but says one persona does not fit all; “... audience has exploded into a dozen niches, we must develop a dozen slightly different personas to write from—the sympathetic expert talking to newbies, the intelligent peer showing respect for fellow techies, and so on” (149).

In order to assess the persona of a given website, we must first examine a number of goals. An activist website will have practical goals related to the organization’s desire to achieve specific results; these goals can be most frequently examined in terms of education for the helping causes, persuasion for the protest causes, and radical action for the revolutionary causes.

In the cases of the helping and protest causes, additional practical goals require the website persona to bridge the gaps between the organization's objectives and the site visitor's objectives. Spanning the gaps in objectives require the website persona to create adherence with the visitor. In other words, the site visitor must want to participate in the cause by means of the website's persuasive elements.

In "Act and Persuasion in Argument," C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, assert that humans "seek(s) to persuade or to convince" (251). In looking at how activist websites seek to persuade or convince, we can examine the level of effort or intensity with which a particular site tries to persuade the site visitor about the cause. In general, it seems that the protest sites (Greenpeace and PETA) employed far more persuasive techniques than either the helping sites (Humane Society and Sierra Club) or the revolutionary sites (ELF and ALF). The Sierra Club and HSUS took the role of information specialist and educator, placing the website visitor more often in the role of learner or information gatherer, sometimes calling out a particular problem without offering the website visitor any means to participate in the solution. In contrast, both PETA and Greenpeace exhort their website visitors to play an active role in influencing others by a number of different means, including real-world protest and participation. PETA especially accomplishes this with sex and humor, while Greenpeace uses testimonies of high-energy activists and appeals to the website visitor's sense of adventure. The ELF and ALF websites make minimal effort to persuade site visitors and instead assert through the message on their

websites (and their actions) that anyone who doesn't agree with their tactics is not truly in favor of the cause.

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, persuasion remains important in “nonlogical arguments,” which, perhaps, means that persuasion is important in arguments that contain fallacies of ethos, pathos, and logos. Insofar as there exists no “universal audience” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Act,” 252), the persona that we are most concerned about remains the persona of the website that must appeal to and persuade a particular audience. However, this website persona seeks to persuade a multi-faceted audience of website visitors.

In order to persuade, the website persona must determine a number of things about the website visitors. There exists a hierarchy of specific assumptions and values to which those website visitors adhere (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Act,” 252), and the need to find those shared values helps to make the interaction—of visitor to site and subsequent intertextual exchange—successful. One of the most important things Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca assert is that connections of succession lead to connections of coexistence and agreement (*NR 293-4*). This was particularly true as I explored the PETA website, which I entered with dread because of preconceptions I had based on both rumor and prior experience tempered by poor memory. PETA positions its least-gruesome visuals and multi-media presentations within the first two or three levels of the site. As the website visitor “descends” further into the site, the information becomes more visual—more horrific. For example, a recent visit to the PETA site and a descent

to the fourth level brought me to a web-based undercover video film about Taiwan's meat trade in dogs and cats.

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, persona undergoes a series of revisions based on audience reaction ("Act" 254). In PETA's website, the electronic persona undergoes a series of revisions, primarily based on the influence of its founder and director, Ingrid Newkirk. Although in the case of PETA these might change the audience's impression of the website, the site maintains a number of past actions and issues, organization history and philosophy, that provide a relatively stable expectation of PETA persona. There is seldom the need for the website visitor (audience) to examine the action on the basis of the context; PETA's values are seldom compromised. One situation in which PETA found itself needing to revise for audience occurred when PETA dropped its pressure on Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and gave concessions not in keeping with their mission statement. Once PETA discovered that KFC had not implemented the new policies and procedures to alleviate suffering and slow death to factory farm animals that were originally anticipated, PETA's response was to broadcast its miscalculation and take KFC to court (see www.KFCcruelty.com/kfcsays.html). Can PETA afford to compromise its sometimes extremist ideals in an effort to gain small inroads toward its ultimate goals or will the organization lose its credibility with its sympathizers?

In contrast, because of the broad spectrum of people and interests that the HSUS serves in a smaller geographical location, this organization is better positioned to act in a specific way based on the context and perceived circumstances (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 254). The

HSUS is a helping, educating, activist organization and its supporters do not expect it to engage in controversial discussion of issues.

Because the HSUS and PETA are different types of activist sites (helping and protest), they use different approaches to obtain similar outcomes; some are based on the act and others are based on the individual (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Act” 255). For example, both PETA and the HSUS are aware of the relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse. PETA addresses the issue with a single (1) webpage action alert and a 15-second public-service announcement (PSA) without imagery narrated by actor Dennis Franz. HSUS, on the other hand, addresses the issue with a national advertising campaign and at least eight web pages on its site. Another issue in which both are looking for similar outcomes but acting in a very different way is vegetarianism and veganism: PETA has more than fifty separate webpages on its site dedicated to veganism (not including its www.goveg.com satellite site) while the HSUS has one webpage that explains a kinder diet and then provides fourteen meat-free recipes. Both websites have something at stake in both issues, but have invested less based on where the issues fit in their particular hierarchy of priorities.

One of the issues that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca raise is that with a person present, circumstances can constantly change; however, if the person is absent, the audience/website user is trapped by the most recent image. The PETA website bears this out with considerable evidence. After criticizing the HSUS for accepting IAMS funding for Petfest America (www.peta.org/feat/hsus (accessed 1/15/04), the PETA site ultimately added an additional eight

webpages and accompanying videos dedicated to an examination of the research laboratory with which IAMS contracted for their animal research. This example of activist website persona is rare and in some ways a good study. The PETA site, a protest website, posts a letter in HTML format from Ingrid Newkirk, its founder, to the director of the HSUS, a helping site, in an attempt to motivate the audience (website visitor) to write letters to the HSUS and to boycott IAMS. In all activist sites, the debate requires the digital rhetor, an audience, and a target. When the digital rhetor of an activist site informs the website visitor of perceived misbehavior perpetrated by the site's target, the activist digital rhetor's objective is to motivate the site visitor to respond, either by donating to the activist group or by communicating (through any means from email to ecotage). The PETA, HSUS, IAMS, and site-visitor argument added an additional dimension—a crossover by PETA into public discussion with a common-issue site in order to differentiate itself from the less-radical HSUS.

As we transition from the person to the act, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would have us consider at length that “constancy is only relative” (“Act” 256), which means that new evidence, the evolution of the personality of the historian, and social change in public opinion will influence how the audience sees the rhetor. In addition, all acts require that we restructure our concept of the person who acts. In addition the value or significance that we attribute to an act leads us to attribute a certain value to the person, but it is not necessarily a higher or lower valuation of that person. Rather, it is a transfer of value, or a revision of our concept of that person (“Act” 256).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca define an act as “anything which may be considered an emanation of the person; in addition to actions, these might be judgments, modes of expression, emotional reactions or involuntary mannerisms.” The person in some ways ends up being a “stepping stone” (“Act” 257) to the act, “permitting the passage from the known to the unknown...from the knowledge of past acts to the anticipation of future acts.” In the case of my exploration of the PETA website, each subsequent page built upon the page before, providing me a stepping stone from the knowledge I had gained by visiting a particular site to an anticipation of future sites, which, from the sequence, I could expect to be documents, images, and video footage that was progressively more gruesome. However, the site met expectations based on my experiences with prior PETA sites.

In contrast, when I first visited the HSUS website, I clicked onto their “Pets” sidebar and then their “Field Projects” link, and ended up staring at a photograph of a near-dead chocolate lab wallowing in muck—a dog who had been abandoned in an apartment six weeks earlier. This inconsistency with what I had expected from the HSUS left me wondering whether or not I had really seen it there or at PETA, the site where I might have expected to see a similar visual.

In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca say that adherence is “the domain of argumentation which is that of the credible, the plausible, the probable, to the degree that the latter eludes the certainty of calculation” (1). This definition of adherence infers that we as technical communicators can measure effective argumentation without performing a numbers-based analysis. Instead, for this study, we determine site effectiveness based on the site viewer’s

perception of persona's credibility. Although the early work of Mary Coney and Carl S. Chatfield addressed persona differences between primary and secondary computer manuals (23), their premises apply readily to the concept of a website rhetor.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca voice an interesting concern that pertains to activism in the introduction of *The New Rhetoric*: "...can we but abandon ourselves to irrational forces, instincts, suggestions, or even violence?" (3). Much of the environmental and animal welfare/rights/liberation argument places itself in the context of rhetoric that requires the audience to accept specific assumptions and principles that may or may not be expressly stated on the site or elsewhere by the organization. For example, a search of the HSUS website yielded 184 separate statements by the society that related to different types of animals (farm, companion, shelter and sanctuary, wild, and ferret) and confused the opportunity to associate the organization with a single mission statement. This particular confusion was somewhat lessened—but resulted in deception—by the bold print slogan prominently displayed across the top of the webpage www.hsus.org: "Promoting the Protection of All Animals." The deception is contained in the contradiction offered in other statements and slogans of policy that pertain to specific categories of animals, such as farm animals, which indicate hedging, depending on the class of animal. On the other hand, PETA's relatively distinctive thirteen-word mission statement is pithy, easily learned, and challenges the audience or website user to either accept or reject it as a starting point for the website relationship: the initial demand for affiliation/adherence. It is: "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment" (www.peta.org).

In terms of online persona, the six activist sites present a few interesting phenomena. Helping activist sites and revolutionary sites, on opposite ends of the activist spectrum, both put forth less effort in presenting a multifaceted persona than did the protest sites. For example, both the helping sites and the revolutionary sites took a hierarchical tone with site visitors, assuming that visitors had less knowledge about the site than they might have and assuming that they were not as well educated about the activist organizations and issues. In contrast, both the PETA and Greenpeace sites took great pains to express themselves as dissidents who included the site visitors. The protest sites were obviously hoping for the most “buy-in” from site visitors.

In terms of tone, HSUS and Sierra Club both assumed an encouraging, teaching tone, with many face-saving strategies. In contrast, the tone of the two protest sites was inclusive. Protest site visitors, if not offended by the first few levels of pages, would leave those sites with the impression that they are part of the community. In contrast, the revolutionary sites were almost hostile in their wariness toward site visitors. The ELF site actually recommended that visitors download a certain type of encryption for communication.

As would be expected, the protest sites and the revolutionary sites relied on affective language far more often than did the helping sites. To a sympathizer, that affective language would not seem nearly as alienating as it might to a person unfamiliar with the cause or one who is in the process of educating herself or himself about the issues.

Although all of the sites paid some heed to persona issues, the protest sites (specifically PETA) had the most distinctive web persona. The helping sites, Sierra Club and HSUS, maintain

a particular distance from their audience; assume more formal writing styles peppered with the occasional double-entendre (for example, “Grist for the Puppy Mill” as a feature link on the HSUS homepage); and avoid the risk associated with comedy in their sites. In contrast, the PETA homepage incorporates puns, comedy, and silly images (a photo from the “Running of the Nudes” shows the backsides of last year’s participants). Table 3 provides a brief summary of how the six activist sites I looked at fulfill Coney and Steehouder’s criteria for website persona.

The rhetorical role that the website author assumes requires the reader to also assume a particular role. Coney gives as an example an author who can be either authorial or helpful, both of which require that the website user assumes the role of an eager learner (23). In the case of activist websites, both the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front, sites that I designated revolutionary, assume roles of radical activists; because ELF and ALF advocate extreme action, the website visitor must assume the role of co-conspirator.

Because there will always be a gap between the actual people who comprise the audience and those imagined by the author, the author’s impulse is often to clarify, change, reorganize and rethink the content, rather than to examine and rethink the audience/author relationship. Coney asserts that the author must reveal the authorial self to those who use the texts (23). In the case of activist websites, the audience must be able to “know” the public self of the digital rhetor.

Website Visitor and Website Rhetor (Persona)

A website visitor will be more receptive to a particular world view if he or she has someone with whom to identify. Thus, activist sites more and more often display pages including the biographies of their directors, presidents, and staff. These biographies often give the website visitor insight into the roles that the site desires the viewer to assume. Other features of activist sites typically include press releases about recent successes, which also contribute to the sites' particular ethos.

In order for the website persona to be believable—credible—the roles of both the site and the user must be compatible, with adequate cues, and with readers who have developed adherence to the situation and are willing to participate in the drama and assume the lead role, whatever it is (Burke *CS* 31-37). In other words, the author is a visible presence, a fellow actor, who aids and abets the heroes/readers in their quest for an experience that fulfills the persuasion/seduction criteria. The Website persona assumes that the reader will have a particular approach to the issue, will hold (or gain) certain convictions about the issue being presented, and will ultimately perform a certain action. Ultimately, the website user moves toward the author's particular world view (Coney 24).

Contemporary theorists have reached beyond the concept of ethos as it relates to a single person to the ethos or character of the organization all the way to encompassing collective acts (Hunt 519). The Web, for Kevin Hunt, is a rhetorical “gathering place” (521), and online ethos is an important element of the website. This “ethos” is not to be confused with persona but the two

are intimately tied; this ethos is the measurable element that will help us determine the credibility, believability, and a large component of the character that persuades or seduces site users.

Hunt suggests that we can determine website credibility by examining the site in terms of whether or not the site is created by institutions, businesses, or firms with a real-world equivalent, such as a physical address and headquarters (519), or a special-interest site, created by individuals acting on their own initiative to provide an online voice either for themselves or for a specific concern or area of interest (519).

Hunt claims that “The challenge to technical and marketing communicators engaged in Web design is to consider how the sites they construct should be situated within the cacophony of individual and organizational voices that make up the Web” (519). The activist sites that we examine have situated themselves into the categories of helping, reform, and revolutionary, because of the persona that they project. The single fascinating anomaly in terms of activist website classification is PETA; because of the prominence of Ingrid Newkirk and her perceived single-minded advocacy, the PETA site traverses classifying categories. On the one hand, the PETA site attacks the HSUS for working with IAMS dogfood company in co-sponsoring a nationwide event for pet owners. Soon after, the ALF homepage prominently displays a link to an email message from Newkirk which describes the best tactics for dealing with the FBI. The relationship between PETA and ALF has often been questioned by Newkirk’s detractors, and similarities exist in the way the sites name their links; links such as “Holocaust,” and “Animals

Bite Back” on ALF can be easily mistaken for “Holocaust on your Plate” and “Kids Bite Back,” on PETA. Also, Newkirk is the author of *Free the Animals! The Untold Story of the Animal Liberation Front and Its Founder, “Valerie,”* which is the history of ALF.

Website visitors gauge the veracity of the sites that they visit and often do not acquire the same impression of the sites as that intended by the website creators. When R. C. Sherman et al. examined homepages, they found discrepancies between the designers’ and the viewers’ perceptions of the site (123-129)—information helpful to activist-site rhetors in terms of content and style. The authors discovered that designers believed that viewers had a more positive impression of the site than they actually did and that the discrepancy between perception and reality for users and designers online was greater than that gap in a face-to-face interaction (Sherman et al. 123). The gap between perceived experience and actual experience for site users has the potential to cause the same frustration and dissociation experienced by software users who dealt with Microsoft’s paperclip. In addition, online impressions are less well-developed than the impressions developed in face-to-face interaction (Sherman et al. 124). Online rhetors are working within the context of a one-way presentation medium, and to a certain extent they forfeit the opportunity for dyadic persona adjustment (based on their knowledge of the “real” audience) to assumptions about an audience that they do not really know (Sherman et al. 125). The challenge of net life is to manage that online persona to account for the online inaccuracies and miscommunications that may result from the technology: people believe that they are more

highly regarded online than they are and that their internal states are more visible to others online than they actually are (Sherman et al. 128-129).

Credible, Persuasive, and Seductive Websites

When considering credibility, a recent study by B. J. Fogg et al. determined that, in nonprofit websites, people searched for the identity of the site operator and underlying company motive when they evaluate site credibility. In general, site visitors were more suspicious of nonprofit nongovernmental sites than any other type of site. Site visitors held nonprofits to a high standard of scrutiny in terms of their trustworthiness, but accepted a lower level of sophistication in terms of design, structure, and information focus. From this credibility study, we can conclude that activist-site visitors place emphasis on persona and intent; activist site visitors want to know *who* is behind the site and *why* more than they care about how professionally the website presents itself in terms of information (Fogg et al.).

If we move from overall credibility to issues of persuasion and seduction, we find that web scholars struggle with the question of persuasive and seductive website experiences. Joyce Long et al. see persuasion as an “interactive process” (265) through which a given message alters an individual’s understanding—meaning knowledge or beliefs. The effectiveness of the persuasion is measured by the degree to which that knowledge or those beliefs change. Beliefs are held with varying degrees of conviction and are often connected with well-remembered episodes or events: they are perceived as true, but *truth or validity is not required*.

According to Long et al., the technology used impacts the persuasiveness of texts and the digital medium continues to present cognitive challenges to users. Traditional paper texts are easier for users to comprehend than text on a computer screen and users ascribe more credibility to an author whose text is in paper format than an author whose text is digital (Long et al. 265). In addition, whether or not there were exciting graphic, audio, or video components to the site produced no significant change in the site's persuasive effect.

Khaslavsky and Shedroff move beyond the concept of persuasive experiences to seduction (46), involving promises and connection with the audience or user's goals and emotions. That promise and seduction is one that makes everyday objects spark curiosity, surprise, and imagination, promising more than what is expected of them. One of the things that they identified is that site visitors will go through a process of seduction comprised of three components: *enticement* (where the site grabs the user's attention and makes a promise), *relationship* (the interaction between the user and the site progresses with small fulfillments and more promises), and *fulfillment* (fulfills the final promise in a meaningful way) (Khaslavsky and Shedroff 46).

For a website to be seductive, it must be culture-specific and focused, and contain elements of mystery and subtle suggestion. The visitor's initial contact must entice that visitor to investigate further the subsequent pages and materials. As we look at our six sites in terms of seduction, Khaslavsky and Shedroff provide the criteria that we see in Table 4.

In order to construct a seductive website, Khaslavsky and Shedroff recommend that the website designer know the audience and find opportunities for a meaningful/emotional connection with the website user (49). The website must “correlate possibilities and possibilities in the audience” (Khaslavsky and Shedroff 49), which means giving the audience a vision of what is possible both collectively (in conjunction with what the activist organization is doing) and individually (what the website user can accomplish on his or her own). The seductive website is a form of persuasion, but it is personal, intimate, emotional, and thus sometimes even more powerful (Crowley and Hawhee 252) than a website based on logic and credibility.

Are activist sites seductive? Based on many of the criteria that Khaslavsky and Shedroff suggest, all six sites exhibit seductive qualities. They move us beyond our expectations, especially if we consider how site visitors react to mainstream NGO sites in terms of the credibility according to Fogg et al. Except for the revolutionary sites, all of the links worked and were up to date. The sites boasted a number of sophisticated uses of digital technology, from sound and graphics to videos and interactive games. For the more moderate sympathizers, the helping and protest sites created an instinctive emotional response (see Table 4).

Conclusion

Although historically persona has been concerned with the actor’s mask and the public self, technical communicators led by Alan Cooper have most recently used the term to refer to the socially constructed “made-up” individual who uses a particular system. Other

communicators question the validity of this concept of persona, preferring to accept the dilemma that writing provides us which says that we never truly know who our audiences are. Because we do not know who our audiences are when we write, we can easily extrapolate that to knowing our web audiences even less. Thus persona is best revisited as the public self, the rhetor on the screen.

I looked at issues of persona in activist websites and discovered that they were probably more persuasive and seductive than the websites of mainstream NGOs, and the websites that used persuasion most effectively were the protest sites, which had the broadest range of goals when it comes to reaching an audience.

Table 3. Persona criteria for both site and visitor (from Coney and Steehouder).

	Helping		Protest		Revolutionary	
	Sierra Club	Humane Society USA	Greenpeace USA	PETA	ELF	ALF
Author Persona Presence	Yes. Imperative, Authoritative	Yes. Imperative, Authoritative, Helpful	Yes. Courteous, Inviting, Inclusive	Yes. Educator, Imperative, Compatriot	No. Not identified	No. Not identified
Peripheral Cues	No. Cues relate directly to what visitor wants from site	Not really.	No. Very direct.	Yes. Most are related to humor and/or sex	No	No
Persona Roles Single? Multiple? (Identify)	The Imperative Encourager; the Historian	Historian Educator	Invitation, Reporting, Imperative, Passive Dissident	Multiple Educator Imperative Advocate, Aggressive Dissident	No	No
Values Emphasized	Outdoors, Conservation	Appreciation for the roles animals play in our lives... as companion animals and as an industry	Environmental protection; adversarial relationship w/ corp, govt	Veganism	Environmental action	Animal Rights/welfare
Visitor Persona Role	Not as an equal, but one who will learn to appreciate	Eager learner	Either guest or friend	Eager learner, Dissident	Lawbreaker	Lawbreaker
Visitor Persona Goals	Learn about environmental issues; take Sierra Club Vacation	Learn more about animals, Humane Society, Donate	To protect all from the atrocities associated w/ the abuse of environment	To stop the use of animals for human interests	Stop development	Stop animal use for human interests

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Table 3 (*cont'd*). Persona criteria for both site and visitor (from Coney and Steehouder).

	Helping		Protest		Revolutionary	
	Sierra Club	Humane Society USA	Greenpeace USA	PETA	ELF	ALF
Visitor Persona Prompts	Direct cues	Direct cues	Direct cues	Relatively direct cues... a gotcha at the end, sometimes	Direct cues	Direct cues
Values Attrib. to User Persona	Concerned about environment; educated; leisure time	Concern for animals, good citizens	Concerned about environment; action-oriented	Concern for animals; in on the jokes	Newbie to the indoctrination or subversive person	Newbie to the indoctrination or subversive person
Distance btwn Rhetor & Visitor	Some... Authority	Some... Authority	None... Rhetor excited to be talking	Lots to none	Lots	Lots
Tone	Encouraging/ Informing	Patient/Calm/ Teaching	Inviting	Inviting	Wary	Wary
Relationship Hierarchical? Egalitarian	Hierarchical	Hierarchical	Egalitarian	Egalitarian	Hierarchical	Hierarchical
Affective Language?	Little to no affective language	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Politeness Strategies	Some	Yes	Yes	Some	No	No
Bald On Strategies	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Face-Saving Strategies	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Table 4. Seductive website elements (from Khaslavsky and Shedroff).

Criteria	Helping Sites		Protest Sites		Revolutionary Sites	
	Sierra Club	Humane Society	Green-peace	PETA	ELF	ALF
Differentiates self from other sites	No... standard format (banner across the top, three columns)	No... standard format (banner across the top, three columns)	No	Yes. The site is a kaleidoscope of imagery, issues, color, celebs, humor	Yes. To enter the site, visitors click on an image of property destruction	No
Goes to extreme to get noticed	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Holds attention w/ something interesting, exciting, beautiful	No	No	Yes, daring activists	Yes...sex sells	Yes, info on site is intriguing	Yes, intriguing imagery
Holds closely to goals and emotional aspirations of viewers	Yes. Main-stream	Yes, Main-stream	Yes. Activist-related	Yes. Activist-related (vegan)	No way to know...if not a sympathizer, you either poke around for curiosity or leave	No way to know
Viewer grows emotionally, intellectually from experience	Perhaps	Perhaps	Yes, based on the presentation of images, articles, etc.	Yes, site humor lets you move further into the site	No	No

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Table 4 (*cont'd*). Seductive website elements (from Khaslavsky and Shedroff).

Criteria	Helping Sites		Protest Sites		Revolutionary Sites	
	Sierra Club	Humane Society	Green-peace	PETA	ELF	ALF
Entice by diverting attention	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes. Always prominent issues to see on first page	No. If you go there, you're going for a reason	No. If you go there, you're going for a reason
Delivers surprising novelty	Yes, by means of features you might not expect	Yes, by means of features you hadn't considered	Yes, first-hand narration of activists in the field	Yes	Yes, The images of Hummers burning and the Colorado lodge torching, perhaps	The release of the animals might have been a novelty for sympathizer
Goes beyond needs/expectations	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Creates instinctive emotional response	Yes...the historical traditions/images	Yes	Yes...victories and history were great features	Yes, even though video often outdated, certain images cannot be erased	Not for a mainstream audience member	Not for a mainstream audience member
Espouses values, connect to personal goals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No—the violence part is beyond most	No—the violence part is beyond most
Promises to fulfill goals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

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Table 4 (*cont'd*). Seductive website elements (from Khaslavsky and Shedroff).

Criteria	Helping Sites		Protest Sites		Revolutionary Sites	
	Sierra Club	Humane Society	Green-peace	PETA	ELF	ALF
Leads to deeper discovery than you expected	No. relatively simplistic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fulfill small promises related to goals and aspirations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
End seduction—as a positive	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Integrate functionality and visual/interactive design	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

CHAPTER FOUR: SUMMARY, FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS, AND RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The study of activist websites in terms of genre and persona provides a benefit for technical communicators and students of technical communication. By examining genre and forms as they relate to community issues, technical communicators can discern the purposes of particular sites and observe firsthand the intentions of and changes in the activist group in terms of scope and direction based on the evolution of forms and content. Knowledge of genre and persona as it applies to activist websites will help communicators to construct web pages and address issues and causes online. Activist websites provide a dynamic arena where digital rhetors exhort visitors to become more informed and to either change their own behavior or influence other stakeholders who may have opposing viewpoints. The dynamics of discourse ebb and flow in the activist website genre; as the discussion becomes more heated, the forms may change to better account for the intensity of the message. For example, although the Humane Society may tell its website visitors that it is working with IAMS to correct some of the conditions under which the IAMS research dogs live, an undercover video from PETA that shows veterinarians and research technicians cutting chunks out of the back legs of anesthetized dogs and then piling them on top of each other says much more.

In looking at helping, protest, and revolutionary websites in terms of genre and content, I discovered that the sites revealed much about their organizational intent based on how they presented their content. Both the Humane Society and Sierra Club sites offered visitors numerous opportunities to sign up for newsletters and alerts and displayed extensive marketing pages that offered everything from packaged vacations to credit cards and stocks. Compared to reform and revolutionary sites, the helping sites demonstrated a moderate attitude toward the issues, spending considerably more effort on explanation and proposed solutions to the problems than impassioned pleas that presumed the site visitor's familiarity with the cause and assumed adherence with the rhetor's views. In contrast, the protest sites assumed the sympathy of the site viewer and prominently featured opportunities for civil disobedience in addition to opportunities for newsletter signup, membership/donations, and merchandise purchase. The revolutionary sites assumed an entirely sympathetic website audience or did not care if you visited or not, as evidenced by the absence of any option to contact a representative of the organization and the absence of requests for donations with the exception of a legal defense fund for jailed suspects.

Persona opens a myriad of opportunities for an examination of community discourse. In terms of activist websites, technical communicators can look at the construction of the website rhetor, the role that the website visitor is assumed to play, and the target(s) of the activist site. Depending on the complexity of the site and the intentions of the activist persona, dialog occurs between the site and the visitor (Does the visitor register with the site? Sign up for newsletters and action alerts? Donate?), the visitor and the target (if the visitor becomes moved to contact the

target by email or letter, or to more actively engage in the discussion through another protest action), and the site and the target (when the target responds to the accusations of the activist site with a text posted to their own site in response to an activist-site accusation). An examination of activist-website discourse can help technical communicators to discern the significance of seduction, persuasion, and credibility in terms of establishing a site persona that persuades visitors. Activist sites possess a special lens for this kind of activity because the transaction that occurs between the visitor and the site is not a market transaction. In many ways, it is a transaction whose outcome hinges on shared values.

In this examination of activist websites that were classified as helping, protest, and revolutionary, we discovered that helping sites remained most concerned with projecting a public self that visitors would perceive as credible. That credibility was enhanced by the sites' use of scientific and socio-scientific reports that provided evidence for their particular stance and offered in some instances compromise solutions to complex issues. Visitors to the sites assumed the role of enthusiastic learner and potential *advocate* for the cause, as contrasted with *activist* for the cause, and were provided the means necessary to engage in either emailing or writing letters to the helping activist-site targets, which were primarily governmental and nongovernmental agencies rather than corporations.

In contrast, protest sites cared less about the need to be credible and instead used a combination of self-promotion based on reports of past actions, a higher percentage of multi-media presentations that contain little positivist data, and a broadcast of upcoming events and

their locations. These protest sites provided avenues for website-visitor interaction that ranged from email campaigns to acts of “real-world, real-location” civil disobedience. Site visitors assumed the role of sympathizer—if not activist—resisting the pull of the dominant culture and assured that the activist site had the answer. Humor lured the activist-site visitor further into the cause; the buy-in came because the visitor knows the joke. These activist sites targeted corporations and, in a unique twist, PETA opposed the actions of a helping site (Humane Society of the United States) which theoretically holds similar goals, and supported the actions of a revolutionary site (Animal Liberation Front). The protest sites examined for this thesis targeted corporations more often than government agencies, however United States President George W. Bush was lampooned frequently by Greenpeace. These protest sites effectively use the comic element to attract and seduce sympathizers.

Revolutionary sites reported events that had occurred and provided rudimentary instruction in civil disobedience and property-destruction techniques. Revolutionary site persona discouraged site visitors which, ironically, may be the lure for some people to visit the sites. The ELF homepage sports an image of destruction without text; site visitors must know to click the image in order to enter. On a 16 March 2004 visit, the image was that of a vacation lodge construction site being consumed by flames and more recently, 16 June 2004, it was that of a burning Hummer. The revolutionary sites provided activist information that instructed the site visitor about how to deal with the FBI, what to wear during night raids, and what to do and not to do if arrested. Neither revolutionary site offered the name of a contact person, but instead

directed the site visitor to a press office if the visitor wanted to report an ecotage event. The site designers must have assumed that those who visit are enthusiastic activists, otherwise the ethics of the action that the sites advocate would create a gap in audience adherence that could not be bridged. For example, the ALF site included a video of a mink-farm raid and numerous photographs of beagle puppies rescued from a puppy mill—the human participants cloaked in black and wearing ski masks and scarves. Other images included graffiti on a McDonald's and paint bombs exploded on the side of a boutique in the Netherlands that sold furs. Both sites encouraged site visitors to work independently and anonymously against any and all targets which included small businesses and farms, research laboratories, and governmental and nongovernmental agencies—in other words, everyone who has anything to do with land development, environmental damage, animal experimentation, animal meat production, and animal byproducts. These revolutionary sites have no outlet for donations per se, but do have a legal defense fund to which sympathizers can contribute.

In some ways, the revolutionary sites resist casual browsing and punish dilettante site visitors. Without a certain encryption on my own computer, I picked up viruses through my computer firewall three times during the course of this research. Because the site itself is illegal and has no ISP of its own, the site uses the computers of casual web surfers to serve as host sites. Once I visited the site, over a period of months the Trojan horse systematically disabled my antivirus software, seldom-used drivers, and finally my keyboard in order to take over my machine. These aggressive actions demonstrate no regard for potential sympathizers and led me

to conclude that revolutionary activist sites are not interested in discourse about an issue and acknowledging multiple facets of an issue but care only about subterfuge and direct action. For some reason, revolutionary activist groups have opted out of the discussion and have no desire to participate in the discovery of compromise solutions in communities. Instead, it appears to me that because of their disillusionment with the dominant voices and their lack of success in being heard, they have opted for total disenfranchisement.

In some cases, the disenfranchisement of less dominant groups in the discourse communities is one of the reasons that the study of activist websites is so important. Activist websites were the first to effectively use the Internet to find a voice and to have an outlet that let them facilitate change. Early successes and community building that occurred through the use of activist websites offer technical communicators the opportunity to hear voices outside of the dominant community. Although longstanding hierarchical organizations now respond with and use websites of their own, the subordinate groups have not been silenced, and website visitors continue to access activist organizations and inform themselves about issues through those sites.

As technical communicators continue to examine issues of ethics, positivism, and social constructions, the study of those digital voices in activist groups remains key. We have seen the consequences of corporate assumptions, positivism, and scientific objectivism in terms of disasters and tragedies such as the Challenger disaster (Dombrowski 97-109), the concentration camps of Nazi Germany (Katz 255-75), and deaths of miners in the United States (Sauer 242-49).

Students engaged in service-learning courses and less-experienced technical writers are perhaps best poised to reap the benefits of association with activist organizations. Many activist groups offer opportunities for Web designers, technical communicators, and editors in internships and temporary positions. Nongovernmental organizations traditionally pay less than their corporate counterparts (Bowdon and Scott 5), but desperately need the assistance of technical communicators; thus technical communication students and technical communicators new to the field often benefit from having responsibility and authority that they would not have been trusted with in the corporate sector.

Conclusion

From the early days of the Net when email communication was the sole electronic means of communication to websites today, activists have been at the forefront of digital discourse and have used the Internet to their advantage to raise awareness about issues, to network with other activists and sympathizers, and to mobilize lobby efforts and protests. By their nature, these activist sites constitute a separate genre, and they include distinguishable forms that the other sites do not possess and lack certain “cues” that indicate commercial sites (such as carts). These activist sites do not limit themselves to ensuring that their pages are credible; because of the versatility of the Internet, they use a number of options for purposes of persuasion and seduction. The persuasive power of the digital rhetorical persona is most apparent in protest sites. The

visitor perceives the helping sites as moderate and better able to recognize both sides of an issue and the revolutionary sites use bald-on techniques that alienate many.

The study of genre and persona in terms of activist sites reveals some interesting phenomena. Activist sites comprise a distinct genre and utilize a number of forms that distinguish them from corporate and business sites. In terms of the persona reflected by those forms, the persona emphasized in activist sites is that of the website rather than that of the site visitor, and activist-site persona involves communication exchanges between the site's "public self," the site visitor, and the site's issue target: three opportunities for dialogue and exchange that we witnessed in terms of some of the sites studied. As technical communicators drift further from the positivist perspective and see things more in terms of a multiplicity of voices and choices, activist sites reveal perspectives on issues that sometimes receive a one-sided treatment by other media.

Current issues that will affect the future of Internet activism include the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) development of the Total Information Awareness (TIA) system. The TIA will make it virtually impossible to possess a "public self" as opposed to a private self, and many activists currently using the Internet for purposes of civil disobedience will find it increasingly difficult to avoid censure and arrest. Post 9/11, organizations such as PETA and Greenpeace that use protest tactics and civil disobedience (and sometimes fund the legal defenses of ALF and ELF members) find themselves accused of

domestic terrorism, piracy, and conspiracy. The comparisons to modern-day Robin Hoods, to al-Qaeda, and to Joan of Arc will probably comprise a separate fascinating study.

Website genre and persona are rapidly evolving and continue to create new opportunities for the study and teaching of discourse. We can expand this study of digital activist genre and persona so that the preliminary generalizations about helping, protest, and revolutionary sites made here could be either furthered or discounted by an examination of human-rights sites. As we examine the intersection of digital forms (without print-based counterparts) and the socially constructed events that yield content, the in-depth study of genre theory, including the work of Killingsworth, Bizzell, Bazerman, Burke, and others, deserves far more attention than it received in this paper.

By examining six activist websites and researching the relevant literature, I established that activist websites constitute a unique digital genre and that the elements and forms that comprise the activist-website genre continue to evolve as technical communicators use the available electronic media to its fullest potential and as technologies continue to change. In extrapolating beyond this research, I conclude that technical communicators deal with a number of different digital genres and we must be sensitive to the digital forms and elements that comprise the most effective means for furthering our communications with audiences and website visitors; we must use those forms and elements when we communicate online in order to

better establish recognizable genres such as personal home pages, activist websites, commercial websites, or political websites, for example.

By using Kotler's categories for classifying activist sites, I discovered fascinating discourse patterns as I considered issues of persona and website goals and objectives. One of the protest sites provided examples of discourse that spanned categories; the intertextual conversation that occurred between the classifications revealed much about the persona of particular sites and the rhetorical strategies that each classification of site used in order to participate in the digital discourse community's issues. I reexamined the question of whether or not activist-site persona should be defined as system designer's end user or the public self and concluded that persona as the public self—the digital rhetor—best served the goal of effective communication between the activist site and the site visitor.

Activist genre and persona are areas of research that have been relatively unexplored in the literature. Although the Internet provides activists effective means to communicate with sympathizers, advocates, and other activists, many challenges keep the Internet from being used to its fullest potential. Our continued examination of genre and persona in activist websites may lead to practices that further discourse in communities where minority voices can be heard, acknowledged, and perhaps even heeded.

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www.hsus.org

www.monsanto.com

www.peta.org

www.ran.org/info

www.sierraclub.org

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