

BOOK REVIEWS

A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities. Tharon Howard. Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997.

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"This is a study of power, the power to monitor what is said, to authorize who can speak, and even to censor what they are saying. But even more important, it is a study of the power to determine what is and is not thinkable or knowable" (2). This statement, on a subject that has become of more and more interest to me as a teacher, as a professional, and as a member of a free society, led me to read Tharon Howard's book *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities*.

As a teacher of writing, I have moved with the current of technology: from teaching in a traditional classroom, with the discussion/workshop atmosphere that prevails there; to teaching in a computer-aided environment (lab), with the use of computers and desktop-publishing software to aid in the production of documents; to teaching in a computer classroom, in which the manipulation of the available technology is as much a part of the instruction as purpose, content, and document design; to finally committing to teach next semester in the virtual classroom of the MOO. And I have viewed with increasing alarm the shift in that current from slow moving and buoyant to what has appeared to me to be torrential flood stage with the potential to drown the very concepts, objects, and individuals it was called into being to support. So I wonder, when the waters recede, on what level will we all find ourselves? As an English teacher, I have greeted with great ambivalence the introduction of each new piece of technology, simultaneously feeling excitement at quicker, more efficient ways of producing documents and distinct unease at the layering of yet another barrier between me and the students I am attempting to teach.

From this somewhat cowardly perspective, I found Howard's book both reassuring and unsettling—which is appropriate, I suppose, because the strongest and most effective theme of the book is his stated (and achieved) intention to take a "Janusian" stance in the doorway between binaries and examine not only the binaries themselves but also the spaces between, the area wherein aspects of both (or many) discrete concepts, objects, communities, and so forth, interact with and affect one another.

In addition to his statement about the study of power, Howard's introduction to *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities* provides a very accessible discussion of the chapters to follow. The introductory chapter reveals an evenhanded approach to his exploration of communities, of theories of community, and of the positions wherein networked text and those who employ it may be situated both within those communities and in the spaces between. Additionally, this first chapter introduces a discussion of the roles that different media play in informing and shaping the meaning of the text they convey—the power of the media. Not just a vehicle, as Howard discusses in more depth in chapters 2 and 3, “the medium is *never* neutral and technological tools are *never* value free” (25).

The study of power continues in chapters 2 and 3, respectively titled “The Social, Political, and Rhetorical Significance of Networked Text” and “What is ‘Electronic Publishing’ and Who Controls It?” and so does the easy accessibility of the discussion. The content of these two chapters is incredibly useful to those of us who use the technology, in terms of understanding how and why the components of electronic publishing (including networks, networked text, e-mail, discussion lists, etc.) work the way they do. Also of interest to anyone who is or will be using some form of electronic publishing, these chapters provide a very clear and well-balanced glimpse into some of the social, cultural, and political (as well as rhetorical) ramifications of this powerful technological tool for which the rules for use are being made up as it goes along. Most admirable here and throughout the book is Howard's demonstrated ability to rise above his own bias in favor of the medium and provide us with “a cautionary tale for those researchers like [him]self who have become fascinated with the potential of the medium” (23).

Although it is well worth the time to unravel, the language of chapters 4, 5, and 6 is somewhat less accessible to the nonrhetorician (and at least this particular writing teacher). Herein, Howard examines “Theoretical Conceptions of Community” in chapter 4 and “Community as a Concept in Rhetorical Theory” in chapter 5. In these chapters, the focus on power and empowerment is more subtle as the discussion centers on an exploration of constitutive and individualistic discourse communities. Through his explanation and discussion of this binary and the constituent binaries of each, he lays the groundwork for a very lucid, readable, and again evenhanded exploration of “‘Electronic Discussion Groups’ or ‘Electronic Communities?’” in chapter 6.

In this penultimate chapter, Howard draws at some length and with no small enthusiasm on his own experience with PURTOPOI, an electronic discussion list that he, along with Patricia Sullivan, created at Purdue University early in 1990. He prefaces his discussion of PURTOPOI by saying, “although it is important to note that my position as a listowner imposes certain limitations upon my interpretations of PURTOPOI, it also must be noted (however paradoxically) that it is this same position that empowers me to speak” (118). Less a paradox than continued evidence of his ability to maintain his Janusian