Chapter 1
On Pixels, Perceptions, and Personae: Toward a Model of Online Ethos

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ABSTRACT
This chapter works toward a four-part model of online ethos connecting classical rhetorical theory to the new age of computer-mediated technology with particular attention paid to the challenges, complications, and possibilities of this evolving rhetorical environment. This model demonstrates the usefulness of updating our understanding of ethos and its place in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The proposed model allows for the assessment of digital ethos by examining others' attempts to develop an online identity based upon: (1) Community Identification and Goodwill, (2) Moral Character and Virtue, (3) Intelligence and Knowledge, and (4) Verbal and Design Competence.

INTRODUCTION
The World Wide Web (WWW) and other online media are no longer infant technologies. They have matured to become an instrumental part of our social, economic, and political reality. While there are many wonders left to be born out of them, and they certainly have no shortage of cheerleaders, they are not perfect. Viruses and worms infect them. Pornographic material contaminates them. Confidence men corrupt them. Radical doublespeak inflames them. And stupidity seems to multiply around them. Yet, one problem seems to serve as a herald—a lack of institutional credibility. Media before the online environment—newspaper, radio, television—all reached a rather high level of credibility in their journeys as purveyors of information in the eyes of the public. Yet, the new online media, especially the Web, have not been elevated to such an esteemed position, perhaps due to the above reasons, but this general lack of credibility problematizes them as persuasive media.

Traditionally connected to our notion of credibility is the very ancient, but still potent, concept of ethos. This very versatile concept has its roots

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in ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric, and it has evolved from meaning a habit of animals to gather in familiar places to the habits of men to act in familiar ways to more simply habits of human character. When these habits of character are perceived favorable by the community, one is said to have positive ethos, and, thus, some level of credibility from which to speak on matters of importance. Without ethos, no degree of logic or passion would be enough to persuade. Therefore, ethos had a special place in the philosophies of persuasion in the ancient Greek world and beyond. This chapter theorizes on the nature of ethos and how the online medium has complicated—or perhaps freed us from—our traditional understanding of it. Following this discussion, we will explore a basic model of online ethos that can be used to assess online ethos-based appeals.

GREEK AND ROMAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER

The Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions serve as important touchstones for our discussion of credibility and character. Aristotle is probably one of the most systematic thinkers in this area, but even he has been shadowed by others. Homer, in the *Iliad*, was the first to offer a basic account of character. While Homer did not develop such an explicit theory of ethos, we can speculate on what traits of character were esteemed in pre-Aristotelian times by carefully reading the stories of his protagonists and antagonists. Homer (trans. 1939) stated in the *Iliad*, for example, that King Nestor was “that grand old man whose counsel was always thought the best. He spoke with honesty and good courage setting out his thoughts neat and clear, like a weaver weaving a pattern upon his loom” (p. 104). Homer suggested in the *Iliad*, for instance, that character is highly valued and fully realized in public contest. We know Nestor best when he is giving advice, in moments of *agon*, to kings and warriors about the war and to Achilles when arguing with Agamemnon or slaughtering soldiers on the battlefield. The Homeric character exuded wisdom, courage, style or eloquence, patience, foresight, bravery, skill, circumspection, honesty, and graciousness, always during times of conflict.

Homer’s focus on character as an element in persuasion was an anchor for more advanced conceptualizations of ethos found centuries later. His version of character, according to Rowe (1983), centered “on the demands of the individual rather than on those of society in the broad sense” (p. 269) and assumed that the man of good character is good insofar as he is useful. As Yamagata (1994) has put it: “a man useful in battle is a good man” (p. 222). Yet, a positive character is an ends, not a means or a rhetorical tool that is explicitly used to gain power or prestige. Homer’s notion of character assumed as important that which Aristotle explicitly excluded—the idea of prior action and reputation. According to Homer’s proto-theory of character, there is an impact on a man’s ability to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to be regarded as worth attending to, by his reputation for wisdom, or perhaps solely of his age precisely because it is perceived as a sign of wisdom, sagacity, “fair-mindedness,” and good counsel.

While Homer wrote about practical skill, Plato spoke of ideals to characterize men of credibility. Plato illustrated his theory of character in his dialogues about dialectic, linking the good rhetor with philosophical rigor and a love for the audience. DuBois (1991) argued that Plato’s notion of dialectic, Plato’s tool for truth, is not unlike torture and can be used to test the character of men: “Philosophy becomes a method of arrest and discipline; philosophical argument is a dividing, a splitting, a fracturing of the logical body, a process that resembles torture” (p. 113). Plato (trans. 1925) wrote in his *Sophist*, “so we have the great man’s testimony, and the best way to obtain a confession of the truth may be to put the statement itself to a mild degree of torture” (237b). Plato then wrote, “let us examine the opinion-imitator as if he were a
piece of iron, and see whether he is sound or there is still some seam in him” (268a). “What would happen,” asked Plato in his allegory of the cave, “if one of these prisoners were released from his chains, were forced to stand up, turn around, and walk with eyes lifted up toward the light of the fire? All of his movements would be exceedingly painful” (Stumpf, 1975, p. 53).

Pain, however, can be physical or psychological. As DuBois (1991) poignantly stated, “only relations of force and labor, the coercion through questioning to arrive at truth, the pushing of the young philosopher to the realm of the metaphysical, the power of the master, can enable the achievement of the truth, of the philosophical life” (p. 122). Yet even if we find truth, it is only the rhetorician, the effective user of language, who can bring that truth to the public. Plato (trans. 1925), therefore, simultaneously acknowledged and constrained the value of rhetoric in asserting that “any man who does not know the truth, but has only gone about chasing after opinions, will produce an art of speech that will seem not only ridiculous, but not art at all” (262c). Plato’s notion of character, then, was necessarily tied to a good man’s ability to withstand rigorous testing of his ideas and his ability to deliver artfully the truth to his community.

Isocrates’s beliefs on the matter of character extended throughout his treatises on rhetorical education. Isocrates insisted that good conduct should be the end of education (see Isocrates, trans. 1980, 1.4.n2). In his speech to Demonicus, he wrote “I have not invented a hortatory exercise, but have written a moral treatise. . . . For only those who have traveled this road in life have been able in the true sense to attain to virtue—that possession which is the grandest and the most enduring in the world” (1.5). His moral beliefs are also evident in “Against the Sophists,” where he discussed good versus bad leaders; good leaders were not those who possessed profound knowledge, but those with sound judgment—those who could best anticipate the contingencies of life (Norlin, 1980).

These earlier writers laid much conceptual ground for Aristotle’s philosophical writings on ethos, and Aristotle’s treatise on rhetoric remains one of the best accounts of character. For him, rhetoric was grounded upon an understanding of the enthymeme, deliberative, legislative, and forensic forms of oration, and three proofs of persuasion (logos, pathos, and êthos). Aristotle (trans. 1991) identified the proof based on ethos as a matter of being persuasive because “the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of belief. For we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others]” (p. 38). In fact, Aristotle declared ethos “the controlling factor in persuasion” (p. 38).

Kennedy (1991) argued that Aristotle dismissed that “the authority a speaker possesses is due to his position in government or society, previous actions, reputation for wisdom, or anything except what is actually contained in the speech and the character it reveals” (p. 38, n. 43). Character, then, was believed to be a perception of virtue, intelligence, and goodwill evinced from the speaker at the time of oration. As Kennedy (1991) has suggested, this may have been Aristotle’s attempt to give laymen, who did not have the advantage of being well known, an equal chance to defend themselves against more reputable individuals (p. 38, no. 43).

Common to the Greek classical age, and every age thereafter, is this linkage between character and the public arena. Though more concerned with the practical over the philosophical, the later Roman rhetoricians asserted in even stronger terms that character is the life-blood of public life. In first century Rome, for example, citizens saw considerable struggle over control and power, mostly by generals like Julius Caesar who commanded the loyalty of great armies. Rome was often threatened not by foreign forces, but by intrastate politics. The demand for men of good character was paramount, and individuals like Cicero and Quintilian strove to demonstrate to others how to become good orators and statesmen.
Cicero’s *Of Oratory* stressed that the man of good character would possess broad knowledge—comprising history, law, and literature. Cicero (trans. 1959) also argued “that the wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State” (1.8). Cicero’s conception of character was based upon the belief that an audience gains its morality from the orator and thus it is the orator’s obligation to study a wide range of topics so that he may move his audience to goodness.

Quintilian’s work, like Cicero’s, was borne from this same political milieu. Quintilian, who has been called “the last great rhetorician of the classical period” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, p. 35), despised where Rome was headed. His *Institutes of Oratory* (trans. 1958) was a reaction to the Second Sophistic and was intended to help mold those who would embrace classical virtues and a love for community welfare. Quintilian’s ambition to write on good leadership is unparalleled in the classic period:

This man is not a plodder in the forum, or a mercenary pleader, or, to use no stronger term, a not unprofitable advocate that I desire to form, but a man who, being possessed of the highest natural genius, stores his mind thoroughly with the most valuable kinds of knowledge; a man sent by the gods to do honor to the world, and such as no preceding age has known; a man in every way eminent and excellent, a thinker of the best thoughts and a speaker of the best language. (12.1.25)

His attributed statement of the orator being a “good man speaking well” highlights the essence of this moral philosophy.

While Greek and Roman philosophers existed in differing cultural and political times, each offered a glimpse into the ancient ideal of good character. While concentrating efforts on moral identity, these theories teach us about life in the public sphere and the importance of community in construction of ethos. Conceptualizations of character have evolved over time, though, suggesting that we might yet find room for interpretation, especially in light of our newest online media.

**POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER**

Internet technologies, like the Web, promise much in terms of what they could do for us as a society of individuals. And though much early conjecturing positioned hypertext and other forms of computer-mediated communication as revolutionary, other research tempered such utopian claims: “New technologies,” like hypertext, “are commonly integrated into cultures in conservative ways, strengthening rather than defying relations of social and political force” (Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 1996, p. 117). In fact, Johnson-Eilola and Selber argued that “the contemporary state of hypertext contrasts sharply with the revolutionary potential prophesied by some of its originators” (p. 117). Schumpeter (2010) wrote “What sounds wonderful for the digital elite could be a nightmare for less-skilled workers.” For example, “The internet of everything will render millions of people who currently look after buildings or perform low-level medical services redundant.” “People who praise the role of information technologies and social networks in fostering democratic movements,” wrote Swayne (2012), “often ignore how the technology has been used to suppress those movements” (n.p.). Swayne added that “Hate groups and extremist religious factions are also using information technologies to spread both information and disinformation” (n.p.). Instead of breaking social norms, destroying social-economic class structures, and leading to a more participatory democracy, computer-mediated communication has simply reinforced society’s structures.

Our new communication technologies, however, are not at all devoid of rhetorical power. On the contrary, hypertext and other new computer
media limit our discursive choices in new ways, changing how we project ourselves in the online public sphere. The key to understanding the online environment as a rhetorical arena is that hypertext is not a broadcast medium like television or radio, but more like a narrowcast or even manycast medium. Narrowcasting as a persuasive strategy enables rhetors to target a very specific audience and craft discourse that is very personal. A manycast or multicast medium is one that targets multiple audiences via multiple mediated strategies (e.g., convergence). Instead of employing general tactics, rhetors can adopt messages to address a specific audience’s needs, values, and expectations. So while political rivals may shake hands on television, which is viewed by people of all parties, they are able to vilify each other online in a way that is not possible in broadcast media. “It is not just program content that affects identity,” wrote Grodin and Lindloff (1996), “but also the use and presence of various technologies” (p. 4, 7). Online media can, therefore, have very powerful influences on public discourse and the construction of character.

Hypertextual documents may complicate, then, our classical understanding of character. Postmodern theory calls our attention to and challenges these traditional ways of knowing and seeing: How can one attribute intentionality to an author whose identity is constructed online and is masked from view? Can a critic get a sense of the author’s convictions based upon a reading of the text? Can one talk of techniques if an author’s intentions to employ a particular tactic are concealed? Since hypertext is defined by the interconnectedness of its information, and rhetors can construct their identities by linking their messages to other websites, does this devalue the subject-position of the author or does it just reaffirm the social-construction approach to identity? How can a critic talk of a hypertext’s effect upon an audience when it is unclear to whom an online rhetor speaks? In other words, since, for most people, it is impossible to answer at this point exactly who, from where, when, how often, and how long a person accesses a given website, are there ways of talking about effectiveness without a fixed audience to measure? Can the choices a rhetor makes still be rhetorically significant despite an ineffective website?

Postmodern theorists have grappled with many of these issues. McNamee (1996) asserted that the web enables users to create “a multitude of identities, all constructed in the ever expanding relational possibilities we engage” that challenge the classical notions of identity (p. 142). The web has expanded the possibilities of self-construction. Online, individuals can (re)create who they are, create anyone new they wish to be, and make that new identity appear credible. Psychologist and CMC researcher Sherry Turkle (1996) wrote that “authorship not only is displaced from a single solitary voice, it is exploded . . . the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit” (p. 158). For some people, their online identities are not simply temporary exercises in gender-bending or role-playing but become a part of who they are offline as well: “you are what you pretend to be” (p. 158). Turkle concluded that “working with computers has led me to underscore the power of this technology as a medium not only for getting things done but for thinking through and working through personal concerns” (p. 164). “I have found,” she argued, “that individuals use computers to work through identity issues that center on control and mastery . . . to think through questions about the nature of self, including questions about definitions of life, intentionality, and intelligence” (p. 164).

Web technologies are, as Levi-Strauss (1960) might have referred to them, “objects to think with.” If we agree with Turkle’s postmodern perspective, no other medium has displayed the concept of the postmodern self so obviously as the WWW has. On the web, posited Grodin and Lindlof (1996), “self becomes multivocal as we carry a number of voices with us. Individuals, then, may find that they no longer have a central core
with which to evaluate and act, but instead find themselves ‘decentered’” (p. 4). Barthes (1977) has argued that “The removal of the Author is not merely a historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text” (p. 145). Not only can an online author or designer construct various types of identities online, but those who browse the web often will acknowledge that they are pulled and pushed in multiple directions. These users often have several windows or pages open at the same time—a concept called multi-tasking—and may experience, as they browse the web, the uncomfortable sensation of being forced to see advertisements and unwanted pages by being trapped in a continual loop of pop-up screens. These phenomena destabilize a sense of being and obfuscate the concept of self. Michel Foucault (1997) argued the author’s importance has disappeared in modern society: “A name,” he wrote, “makes reading too easy” (p. 321). Knowing the author of a text, according to Foucault, will only guide the reader toward a limited view of the discourse, closing the mind of the reader and thus hindering the opportunities for a more encompassing interpretation. The important marker of a text, therefore, is not its author, since concentrating on the author’s identity clouds the real issue: How does the technology of the medium alter the identity of the reader? In “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault (1997) asserted this claim by announcing that he is more interested in “the interaction between self and others, and in the technologies of individual domination, in the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of the self” (p. 225). By technologies of the self, he means those abilities “which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (p. 225). “From the eighteenth century to the present,” he wrote, “the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different text by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self” (p. 249).

To say that readers of online sources have limited options for action is simplistic; they have a variety of methods by which to express themselves online, freed by the medium. Verbalization is not the chief method of expressing the self online, though users can usually write electronic mail, join listservs, post on blogs, and the like. Users have innovated a new technology of the self online: They have the option of easily leaving the conversation that exists between them and the webpage designer by moving to a new page or retracing one’s steps to a previously visited site. There are no social obligations or cultural forces insisting on a particular manner of online behavior. This method of expression is, according to Foucault, a form of confession in which the user admits his contempt or boredom. The user can reify his or her online identity by entering or leaving these webpages and thereby constructing for him or herself the type of online user he or she wishes to be. One’s history file on the computer becomes an identity of sorts. Foucault’s perspective, therefore, can complicate our understanding of the audience in ways that webpage designers have taken note. These rhetors do appeal to our impatience by constructing pages that invite us inside their self-created worlds. Their worlds are real because audience members answer this invitation—rhetor and audience blur in these moments because the audience creates the rhetor and rhetor, thus inventing the audience. New media have faded the clear line between author and reader. In the hypertextual world, the “audience” does not exist in the classical sense. While knowing the audience is impossible, this does not mean that audience is irrelevant. Online rhetors make very real choices based on their perceived audience, which provide insight into how various web designers think. The once popular hit counter, for instance, might suggest a few ideas about a web designer’s intentions. The
web designer’s reasons may be pure, which is to say the designer may wish to assess the popularity of his or her website over time, and may make changes to the site depending upon the number of such hits. On the other hand, a designer may wish to project the image of popularity instead, revealing doubts of self-confidence or suggesting what the designer believes his or her audience thinks of his or her character. Regardless of our assessment, such technologies offer us a glimpse into the mind of the rhetor and what he or she thinks about the perceived audience and self. Whether or not the WWW is Baudrillard’s (1988) fated simulacrum—an illusory world in which signifiers have more realism than the signified—the decisions one makes online are rhetorically important (pp. 170-2). What is worth noting is that readers influence the online text so significantly that they simultaneously become part reader and part author. This suggests that no webpage is the result of a single author, but instead co-created by designer and users, or those we may now call participants. Any assessment of an online text, then, should not ignore the online participants that helped shape the text. A judgment of the author is, in part, also a judgment of the reader.

DIGITAL ETHOS AND ITS ASSESSMENT

Although rhetoricians are interested in how technologies such as the web become appropriated as discursive arenas, little attention has been paid to how the medium complicates our understanding and assessment of ethos. In fact, according to Chung et al (2012), “Although many studies have described the characteristics of online media, few have considered how the unique technological elements afforded by the Internet may affect their perceived credibility” (p. 174). Online ethos is no longer a face-to-face phenomenon and stable identities are rarer as we venture onto websites, chatrooms, and email. Indeed, following their analysis of forty-two online learning community evaluation studies, Ke and Hoadley (2009) asserted that “the idea of creating a monolithic, one-size-fits-all . . . evaluation model may not work” (p. 505). Furthermore, “Given the infinite nature of CMC,” argued Apostel and Folk (2008), “an easily defended checklist, cannot . . . be developed nor should it be” (p. 19). So, whatever the final design, a useful model needs to be flexible and draw from multiple approaches. We might start, for instance, by re-assessing our research on identity, persona, and credibility in light of the Internet. As a start, traditional argumentation theory, for example, shows us that credibility can be enhanced or limited by our assessment of the sender and the quality of the message. The online environment complicates these two elements, posing problems for online groups that wish to create a credible identity.

Online, it is often extremely difficult to identify and thus evaluate the credibility of “authors” because the identities of online authors are almost always obscured by the online environment. On some pages, the source of the information might be named yet not further identified. On other pages, there may not be any attribution at all. One website about Martin Luther King, Jr. (2012) boasted that they deliver the “Truth about King,” information about his speeches and writings, and even include suggested readings. Though it will not take most people long to realize that the site is highly critical of King, denouncing his work and influence, many people could still be fooled. There is no author listed, but a link to a group called “Storm Front” is present at the bottom of the page in fine print, linking to a page with a large logo with the words “White Pride World Wide” on it. Sites that make the average reader hunt for authorship, such as this, confuse and complicate our ability to assess credibility, which is obviously non-existent in this case. Plus, most of the time, there is no phone number, mailing address, or link that might allow the user to follow-up on the information. In any case, names and institu-
tions can be easily falsified. Even on Facebook, which has a minimum age limit of thirteen for members, manipulation is high. Falsifying one’s age is very easy, and there is no real way to know if the person you are talking to is a minor or adult, which makes communication through this very popular medium very tricky. As Wright (2010) has stated, “Evaluating information—especially information available online—is truly an art, and it takes practice” (p. 65). Since identifying sources is difficult, readers are sometimes forced to make judgments about the quality of the information alone. Yet, even this too is difficult with this environment. According to Wu et al. (2010), two major trust antecedents can aid in establishing online credibility. Specifically, they found that “perceived interactivity has a positive impact on consumers’ initial online trust” in a lesser-known online source, and “perceived Web assurance is a robust institution-based antecedent to consumers’ initial online trust” (p. 16). As a result, creating a secure and engaging environment seems key.

Basing our judgment of an online source purely on the quality of the information itself is suspect. Web-based information, like the identity of the author, may be authentic or totally contrived. Users should, therefore, be skeptical of all web material. One of the first steps in assessing the credibility of information should be determining whether or not the information can be verified. Freeley (1990) asserted that verification is critical for assessing the credibility of evidence (pp. 109-12) and Newman and Newman (1969) highlighted the importance of a corresponding concept—authenticity (p. 66-71, 77). “If a statement has no potential for verification,” wrote Ziegelmueller et al (1990), “it is not factual” (p. 58).

How does one verify online information? “The key to successful Internet use,” said Carlson (2009), “is knowledge of what to look for as you evaluate the quality of the information offered” (p. 200). The problem online is that everything, from music to images to text, is comprised of digital bits that can be falsified and made to look as authentic as the real thing. Images on one online source can be made to look exactly like the images on another or faked entirely. The “Dihydrogen Monooxide” (2012) website claims to be raising awareness of a very dangerous chemical compound that is apparently everywhere in our environment. Too much of it and we could die. The authors state that groups such as the Environmental Protection Agency have ignored this problem. The site, which may appear professionally designed to some, even has a logo affixed to the main page by a non-existent United States Environment Assessment Center, which makes it look even more credible. What is noteworthy is that, despite the fact that Dihydrogen Monooxide is scientific jargon for water, visitors have been routinely donating money to the authors of the manipulative site for more than a decade. Beyond this form of “creative artistry,” web designers can easily “publish” articles that have been plagiarized from other sources or they can cite research and statistics without attributing the correct source. In fact, much of the information available online is without citation. How can one verify information that has no link to its source? There is so much information online, and it changes so frequently, that close scrutiny is excessively complicated. December (1996) stated that “the Web is characteristically, notoriously changeable, with new technologies (servers, browsers, network communication) as well as new content being introduced continuously.” CMC researcher George Landow (1992) once wrote that online materials “by definition are open-ended, expandable, and incomplete” (p. 59). Some webpages change daily and often radically. Though argumentation theories note that the concept of recency is critical in assessing the credibility of information (see Ziegelmueller et al., 1990, p. 96-99; Freeley, 1990, p. 118; Newman & Newman, 1969, p. 84), the unpredictable, quick-changing nature of online information creates special credibility problems for assessing web-based and perhaps other online materials.
We need to come to grips with changes wrought by the online technology for the creation of online ethical appeals. Heim (1988) asserted that face-to-face theories of character were appropriate for the “classical age when direct human contact predominated in the public process,” but now our understanding of how online identity is created should be revised as “more than a theory of direct verbal persuasion among human beings” (p. 57-8). Online users may employ visual images, animation, sound, video, hypertextual links, games, chatrooms, real-time interaction, and many other technologies in order to identify with their interlocutors and establish ethos. In her questioning of the classical concept of ethos as it relates to the problem of authorship in digital poetics, Fleckenstein (2007) suggested that Aristotle’s classical concept actually works quite well: “Lodged within a context that blurs seeing and saying, Aristotle constructs a concept of ethos that emphasizes the liquid movement among speaker, audience, scene, and context, offering a powerful lens for re-seeing author positions.” Therefore, we should keep those parts of traditional concepts and assessment paradigms that are relevant, but be ready to adopt new measurements as appropriate for the new medium. In his analysis of the Vatican’s website, for instance, Frobish (2006) demonstrated “how a group’s special circumstances could call for a different set of rules regarding ethos and identity” (p. 67). In fact, the Vatican’s site “did not need to personalize the site for its users, link itself with outside groups, or maintain an attractive background to draw and sustain the interest of its users” (p. 67), and yet it was still able to build substantial ethos for its efforts.

When assessing whether or not a given word, image, or technology is an ethical appeal, it may be more helpful to distinguish between what is artistic and inartistic. In Aristotelian terminology, this suggests a difference of design. For example, the fact that a web designer creates or employs a hypertext link is not as rhetorically interesting as to how that particular link associates the site with the credibility of others. In traditional rhetorical criticism, scholars would look at the textual content of the page to assess strategies of credibility, yet, as Warnick (1998) argued, “mere attention to the words on the web page will not suffice, since the images are so important to textual meaning. Even in texts without image, the way that the text is displayed on the screen has rhetorical impact” (p. 77).
appeal, specifically virtue. Is it any less apparent when an organization places a photograph on its website showing its employees supporting Big Brothers/Big Sisters, or perhaps building houses for Habitat for Humanity? What if a commercial organization creates a link on its Facebook page to the Big Brothers/Big Sisters’ site? Is that any less of an ethical appeal seemingly designed to build an image of virtue, communal welfare or goodwill, and so forth? Web technologies, like words, can be strategically employed by online groups to build ethos. Any word, phrase, image, or web technology may constitute an ethical appeal, and is worthy of critique. A web assurance seal, for instance, may help establish a secure look and create additional trust with users, but only in certain circumstances. As Wu et al. (2010) have shown, “it is not the displaying of a Web assurance seal itself but the perception of it that matters in trust formation.” If users “pay no attention to a Web assurance seal or if they fail to understand its purpose, the seal may not achieve its intended effect even if it is displayed prominently on an e-vendor’s Web site” (p. 17).

Rather than attempt to classify thousands of web technologies and speculate as to how they might be used as appeals to ethos, it seems more reasonable to reorganize the types of ethos appeals that might be possible within the online environment. Instead of relying upon Aristotle’s tripartite theory of ethos, which may be too limiting, we may wish to investigate other systems of thought. Credibility expert Sharron Kenton (1989) developed a four-part typology of ethical appeals that appears more suited for the analysis of web discourse. Her four-part system consists, first, of goodwill and fairness, which includes a rhetor’s focus on the receiver, displays of concern for the receiver’s welfare, and an unselfish attitude. Second, she includes expertise, which incorporates appeals based upon the training, experience, qualifications, intelligence, competency, and achievements of the rhetor. The third factor is prestige, suggesting those appeals relating to the rank, power, position, or status of the rhetor. The final factor in her typology is self-presentation, or the verbal abilities, platform skills, dynamism, energy, charisma, and confidence of the rhetor. Beaston (1991), who adapted Kenton’s typology for his analysis of ethos in business speeches, removed goodwill and fairness, prestige, and self-presentation. He adds deference or respect for the audience, self-criticism or one’s humility, similitude or attempts to create interpersonal relationships with audience members or to build a sense of community, and the inclination to succeed, or one’s confidence and drive. Kapoun’s (1998) evaluative system for online credibility has become very popular as a teaching tool at universities, particular within library sites. His assessment model includes the concepts of accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage. Tillman’s (2003) model asked the evaluator to assess the quality of the online source by questioning the appropriateness of the source for the user’s needs, ease of identifying the currency and authority of the source, stability of the information, and the ease of navigation and speed of the connection. There is no shortage of assessment models. In fact, Apostel and Folk (2008) argued that “as CMC technology and content continues to evolve, different means of negotiation need to be developed and continually re-evaluated that address the concern of finding reputable, reliable information and re-presenting it in a world where the nature of information is radically different” (p. 19). Assessing previous models and discovering and combining the best of each may be one reasonable way to move forward.

Each of these previous methods has strengths and weaknesses that must be considered in the design of this chapter’s model of digital ethos. Kenton’s typology better addresses the technological aspects that classical theories of ethos cannot presume to consider, but her categories seem to overlap in some crucial areas. How do competency, a component of her “expertise” category, and platform abilities, a component of her “self-presentation” category, differ exactly?
It seems possible that, online, one’s ability to deliver a dynamic website might equate to a degree of technical competency. So, competency and self-presentation could be connected. Beaston’s typology is helpful since it allows for the criticism of community-based appeals, but fails to consider the moral component or virtue of the rhetor.

“Given the constantly changing state of digital culture and the ramifications of increased multimodality, access, diversity, viewpoints, and information styles on the web,” Apostel and Folk (2005) advocated against “replacing one set of rigid criteria with another.” A more general scheme is necessary, then—one that can avoid the problems of these earlier methods and allow for some flexibility when evaluating the new online media. As the previous sections have demonstrated, a rhetor’s ability to show online participants that its members constitute a common community and that he or she is willing to adapt and respond to that community’s needs, is the first step toward building trust and gaining the assent of the audience. Also important is the morality or virtue of the rhetor. Showing that one celebrates the values of the community and that one is fair-minded, honest, and not self-interested can help establish the kind of virtuous ethos discussed by Aristotle, Quintilian, and others. A rhetor’s ethos, furthermore, is tied to his or her intelligence and knowledgeability—proof that one is qualified and able to deliver on promises. Finally, the technological means of building ethos and identity are especially salient. As both Warnick (1998) and Hunt (1998) have been cited as suggesting, the power and visual impact of the text and structure of the site can suggest important things about the

Figure 1. Model of online ethos
character of an online user or group. Therefore, assessing one’s verbal and design competency is necessary if we are to accurately evaluate a website’s appeals to ethos and identity.

Based upon a review of these prior issues, I propose a four-part system for the assessment of online ethos and identity, consisting of appeals to (1) Community Identification and Goodwill, (2) Moral Character and Virtue, (3) Intelligence and Knowledge, and (4) Verbal and Design Competence. This typology considers both classical speaker-oriented factors and the more visual and technological components of ethos and identity. The above model of online ethos is demonstrative. By developing an identity based upon Identification and Goodwill, for example, an online rhetor shows a willingness to engage the community. By developing an identity based upon Moral Character and Virtue, an online rhetor shows the proper ethical awareness and moral compass to guide others. By developing an identity based upon Intelligence and Knowledge, an online rhetor shows a valid position from which to make arguments. By developing an identity based upon Verbal and Design Competence, an online rhetor shows the capability to deliver on promises made. The creation of a willing, ethical, valid, and capable persona can lead to a powerful and persuasive ethos that can lead others to action. The model can be especially useful, furthermore, by working as an assessment tool for the evaluation of online sources and their attempts to develop ethos and identity. The below elaboration will further demonstrate the usefulness of this four-part process, taking into consideration the unique possibilities and challenges of developing these rhetorical traits.

Community Identification and Goodwill

Though having reliable and verifiable information is important to an online user’s credibility, the preceding review of ethos shows us that establishing a community-oriented identity is essential. In classical times, orators were expected to show to audience members, by means of face-to-face communication, that they spoke either for their benefit or for that of the larger community. This is ever more important today as people often feel less connected. The WWW was prophesied to bring people together, but many users feel more distanced in online settings. In fact, Cheseboro and Bonsall (1989) have said that CMC seems to “promote efficiency at the expense of special contact” (p. 221). It makes sense then to more fully examine how building that community-based identity is possible via CMC and what obstacles they might pose for groups wishing to establish this form of identity. This is important since, as CMC scholar Steve Jones (1998) has remarked, “conspicuously absent is an understanding of how computers are used as tools for connection and community” (p. 5).

Establishing a connection with one’s audience might be the most effective means of establishing positive ethos for online users. To establish this connection, a group may simply point out commonalities between it and the online users to create identification. It may also occur by either making the user feel a part of particular larger community or making the user feel important, as if his or her contribution is significant and needed for the health of the community. Certainly, showing the audience that you are willing to adapt and respond to its needs can significantly help establish trust. And while not all online sources are equal, the importance of establishing a communal identity is undeniable. Frobish (2004), for example, showed us that even with the case of a sexually oriented website such as Playboy’s creating a communal identity plays a very important role. In this case, Playboy offers its users what it believes they want, a community of like-minded people who share the Playboy ‘lifestyle’ . . . and focuses on the sort of identity that would attract a variety of users to the

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site—one designed to assuage their concerns over privacy and security so that they feel comfortable buying the Playboy merchandise.

Groups can appeal to community verbally. Often, a rhetor might say things such as “I understand where you are coming from,” or “My parents, like yours, were not rich people,” or “Your vote is needed to sustain the type of society that you and I, and now our children, have come to love and appreciate.” Furthermore, “whenever the speakers use the term ‘we’ to refer to both themselves and their audience,” says Beaston (1991), “they are claiming group membership with that audience,” which “can be a subtle type of affiliation” (p. 331). Linguistic appeals that vilify a common enemy may also help build community. Rhetorical scholar Roderick Hart (1998) has argued that “feelings of antipathy directed toward some person or group . . . has long been the handmaiden of community” (p. xxv-xxvi). These verbal appeals work to build a sense of identification and trust between the rhetor and audience and are no less powerful in CMC. As Wu et al. (2010) have shown with their research, “In a computer-mediated communication environment that often tends to be impersonal, visitors desire to be treated as a human being or a guest” and as “message personalization increases, the perceptions of interactivity and Web site effectiveness are enhanced” (p. 18). Yet, digital designers do not have to rely upon these verbal appeals as the only way to build this connection.

Perhaps the clearest way to build communal identity online is for groups to embrace technologies that link people together. This can be done in many ways. Websites may provide e-mail links that can connect users to site administrators or directly to those in the group’s hierarchy. It may allow users to register to receive periodical community newsletters, register on a community e-mail list, join with others in online chat rooms, allow users to sign a guestbook or blog, and so on. Facebook allows users to create multiple friend networks consisting of thousands of other users. Your success in many of Facebook’s games, such as Farmville and SuperHeroCity, is even dependent upon the number of friends in your network who are linked to the same game. In their analysis of political websites, Frobish and Thomas (2012) revealed how “social networking capabilities, specifically, have certainly allowed website developers to incorporate more advanced interactive options, increasing the possibilities for user engagement, personalization, and eventual contribution.” As Chung et al. (2012) demonstrated, “just ‘being online’ does not add much credibility if . . . users fail to choose multimedia features, control the flow of additional information, and actively respond to content” (p. 182). The good news is that the possibilities for this sort of community interaction are continually growing as the online environment develops. Online sources that can connect users to some larger community of people may make those same users more prone to trust the group that designed it.

Another way in which an online source might establish a communal identity may be to offer users free gifts. An online source that offers it users free services (e.g., books, videos, memorabilia, free online virtual pets, discounts), especially those that increase brand recognition for the group (e.g., books about the group, buttons with company logos), may help to establish a sense of goodwill. Additionally, blogs, Facebook pages, or Twitter feeds that act as informational news resources might appear altruistic and could establish the same communal goodwill identity.

Online sources can create a communal identity by incorporating visually appealing items such as pictures or videos with which users can identify. Images of flags on a political website, for instance, might suggest that the group is patriotic and cares about the larger American community. Pictures of children on a school’s Facebook page might promote a child-centered teaching philosophy, showing that it cares about the community of the future. Certainly, a commercial shopping site that allows its users to view products or provides its
users coupons for these products might represent a goodwill effort on the behalf of the group to the larger community. Even professors who build websites and post their academic resumes or syllabi might be showing that they belong to, and work for, the academic community.

It may seem that creating a community-based online identity is an easy process, but there are obstacles to overcome. First, the previously examined online security and anonymity problems may create obstacles for groups that wish to build a communal identity. Second, for groups or users who have credibility problems offline, it is unlikely that users would easily assent to community-based appeals, especially if that group has a self-serving reputation or if other parts of the group’s website suggest an anti-community persona. Third, sites that rely upon web-based interaction or connectivity as their sole rhetorical strategy might not sufficiently develop sufficient ethos for persuasion. CMC scholar Steve Jones (1998) has written that “interaction ought not be substituted for community, or, for that matter, for communication” (p. 31). Though establishing a communal identity is important and has withstood the test of time as a vital factor in building ethos, it is not the only available ethical strategy online. There are other CMC-based appeals that are especially relevant and deserve notice.

**Moral Character and Virtue**

A second factor in building ethos and identity online is that of moral character and virtue. One’s moral character is typically evaluated by whether that person has followed standards of good or just behavior, or if that person appears to have good or just intentions. Moral character or moral purpose is linked to virtue such that one must embrace certain virtues to be considered moral. A person who has murdered another is not moral because he or she has violated specific virtues such as the love for life, respect for another’s self-autonomy, and self-restraint—virtues that form the crux of civil society. Many general virtues such as honesty, candor, humility, and sincerity might play a role in the perception of a rhetor’s moral character. In fact, Aristotle (trans. 1992) wrote that justice, courage, temperance, magnanimity, and magnificence, were the “virtues of the soul” (p. 64).

Online communicators, regardless of their purpose online, must communicate in a way that proves to their interlocutors that they are not above the needs of the larger community or its interests. They must, furthermore, appeal to what that specific community believes is right, just, or the correct course of action. In case of a political website that is promoting a candidate for office, all efforts should attempt to show that the candidate is honest, sincere, fair-minded, dedicated to the party, and courageous enough to take action. This may take the place of video testimonials from others that discuss qualities of character, textual proof of voting records, pictorial and narrative biographical information, and so on. For a religious blog seeking to create identification with followers to maintain their fellowship, the moral dimension of ethos is crucial, which may call for linguistic and technological appeals that show a leadership that is kind, honest, humble, and community-focused. In this case, the blogger may wish to focus its narrative on the church’s charity work, links to important church information, and pictures or video of church events. Even sexually oriented online groups might wish to establish a common ground of anti-conventional morality with users by posting pictures and video that celebrate sexual behavior as perhaps indicative of personal freedom, free expression, art, self-empowerment, and so on.

Scholars have long argued that demonstrating one’s moral character or virtue has an important role in a rhetor’s ethos and identity. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (trans. 1934) wrote that “Mock-modest people, who understand things, seem more attractive in character” (p. 102). “For the man who loves truth,” he wrote, “inclines rather to underststate the truth; for this seems in better taste
because exaggerations are wearisome” (p. 101). Modern communication research has continued to demonstrate the value of self-critical honesty. Norton (1983) has explored the importance of an “open style,” one in which the person communicates personal and sometimes risky information about him or herself. Interpersonal scholars have recognized that increased self-disclosure is typically connected to an increase in trust. Beason (1991) has argued that rhetors can develop ethos “by openly admitting the shortcomings of their claims, abilities, or affiliated organizations” (p. 336). Too much self-criticism, however, can be counterproductive, especially for groups that also need to show some expertise. Therefore, humorous or light-hearted self-criticism may be necessary for some groups who wish to develop moral character, and maintain their expert status.

Moral character or virtue may be established verbally through several means. First, online rhetors may directly talk about the importance of communal values, such as “liberty” in the case of political groups, “kindness” in the case of the religious groups, or “economic empowerment” in the case of commercial groups. Language that seeks to remind audience members about or reinforce the importance of these virtues might help build trust and credibility. Second, downplaying one’s successes linguistically may serve to show audience members that the group or rhetor is neither presumptuous nor self-promoting. A political candidate could say, for instance, “while I have worked hard to eliminate poverty in the community, there is still much more work yet to be done.” A religious leader who has received an award could show humility by stating the names of others who should share in the recognition. Commercial organizations may show their history of charity in support the appearance of moral character and virtue.

There is no simple list of online technologies that necessarily suggest moral character or virtue online. This does not mean, of course, that online communicators cannot use new media to demonstrate high morality, but high morality may be more tied to how they use those technologies. Awards or proof of achievements do not have to be emphasized, for instance, or presented at all. Perhaps, a better way to think of moral character and virtue in a technological sense is to imagine modest online discourse—one that, according to Hogel (2000), did not “get wrapped up in all the latest high tech bells and whistles.” So, for groups that are already perceived by users as credible, hit counters, guestbooks, awards, flash animations, and so forth, have the potential to make them seem arrogant and dated. Online moral character and virtue, therefore, is probably evaluated best by the absence or moderate use of such web technologies.

**Intelligence and Knowledge**

Appeals designed to demonstrate one’s intelligence, knowledge, or general qualifications may help to build a communicator’s ethos and identity. Someone who discusses his or her prestige, experience, competence, qualifications, legitimacy, or authority is likely seeking to establish trust with its users. One’s prestige (e.g., rank, seniority, reputation, and status), for example, suggests something about the quality of work done by the rhetor. One’s prestige is, by definition, based upon one’s past efforts and is, therefore, important for a group whose future success is dependent upon past success. Indeed, many people see past performance as the sole basis for ethical judgment.

Listeners and readers seem more likely to believe and trust those who can verbalize that they are intelligent and knowledgeable about issues important to them. Politicians often use their family history, education, voting record, and so on, to build the perception that they have qualities worthy of the office and are, therefore, worthy of their supporters’ votes. Religious groups might speak of their divine knowledge or inspiration, which, in turn, gives them authority. They may also talk about how many supporters they currently have, as evidence that established authority. Com-
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commercial organizations may discuss their financial successes, stock performances, or how many years they have been in business as indicative of their corporate intelligence and business knowledge. One obvious way to demonstrate one’s qualifications is to show a resume. Although placing a resume on a personal website can highlight one’s effort to the larger community, it also highlights one’s qualifications. And although talking about your intelligence on a Facebook posting may provide a textual means of establishing ethos, and probably no small amount of arrogance, there is also a whole visual and technical realm of possibilities.

Online communicators have many new possibilities to build the perception of intelligence and knowledgeability through visual and technological means. In fact, there are times when one might wish to eschew verbal appeals all together for the visual or technological. Beason (1991) has written that verbal statements of one’s reputation or past achievements can be dangerous, especially since they may be perceived by audience members as conceited. Alternatively then, websites may display their technological accomplishments to suggest, perhaps more delicately, their qualifications or expertise. Some of these are content-related, emphasizing, perhaps, the intellectual expertise of an individual’s efforts or that the individual has contributed significantly in some way to society and has been acknowledged for that work. Others may speak to technical competence or design ability. There are quantitative endorsements such as those provided by counting awards, hit counter clicks, guestbook, blog comments, and Facebook “likes,” or YouTube views, which might be employed by those wishing to demonstrate the support of thousands, or in some cases millions, of users. Such appeals might suggest, in some way, a certain level of legitimacy or authority. These web technologies, however, are easily manipulated and can easily be made to exaggerate one’s claim to legitimacy and authority. There are qualitative endorsements as well, which include such things as image and video testimonials. Certainly, images showing politicians or religious leaders surrounded by bands of supporters might work better to show popularity and therefore a higher degree of legitimacy. But, even here, online images can be distorted or falsified. Because of these complicated issues, users may look to other types of appeals for evidence of character and credibility. Hypertextual links, as yet another option, may also be employed to create the appearance of intelligence and knowledgeability by borrowing the ethos of other individuals or groups. Not only do links provide users a path to additional information and resources, which may prove some amount of knowledgeability on the part of the originating source, but they may also give unofficial support to these linked-to individuals and organizations. Much like naming powerful friends in an election speech, a new local political campaign website that aims to build credibility can link to national party sites, elected officials, appropriate think tanks, and so on, attempting to create the appearance of legitimacy and authority. In her review of the traditional rhetorical canons and how podcasting may have complicated concepts like ethos, Bowie (2012) suggested that

*In previous media, especially print texts and speeches, the testimony would only be quotes, which are helpful but not as persuasive as the actual voice or image of the speaker giving the testimony. Likewise, including the spoken words of witnesses or authorities will make the argument stronger and more reliable and trustworthy.*

The possibilities of building intelligence and knowledgeability through the use of visual and technological means may, therefore, surpass those possible through verbal means alone.

**Verbal and Design Competence**

A fourth factor in building ethos online is the concept of verbal and design competence. This section is critically important to an understanding
of how groups are attempting to build ethos and identity online. Certainly, a student that builds a personal website with his or her professional portfolio on it might seem more technologically proficient to prospective college recruiters than a student who does not, even if the website was not professionally developed. On the other hand, universities and corporations are expected to have a professionally designed online presence on multiple platforms, and then compete with each other to attract customers. So what is considered “competence” may not be whether one has a website, Facebook page, or YouTube account, but, instead, whether one’s online presence projects a sense of quality about the hosting individual or organization. The shopping site that looks more attractive than its competitors is certainly more likely to gain the trust of users than a shopping site that is poorly designed and difficult to navigate. What is most important is that, online, there is definitely “a relationship between format and source credibility” (Armstrong and Adams, 2009). The higher the attractiveness or quality of the format, the stronger the perceived credibility of the online source.

We may consider many elements when assessing appeals to verbal and design competence, all of which can aid in building trust between online communicators and users. We may assess, for example, a group’s verbal skills, including appropriate word choice, use of active voice, clarity, boldness, brevity, use of effective metaphors, and so on. These are traditionally considered stylistic choices, and the masculine form, characterized by brief, declaratory statements, active prose voice, a loud or projected delivery, and fewer pauses is perceived more credible (Kenton, 1989). The same may be assumed of online discourse. Communicators who employ high-impact language, active voice, and rich metaphors might create a more textually attractive, and thus more credible-sounding, site. In fact, in one analysis of blog posts, a masculine writing style was found to increase the perceived credibility of the postings (Armstrong and McAdams, 2009). Political groups whose goal may be to provide information about policies or futures political objectives, for example, may not gain the trust, and, therefore, the vote of a user if the group is not able to forcefully articulate its message, or if they present an online message so terribly designed that users are not willing to read the message at all. In fact, the same could be said of any Facebook page, blog, or gaming platform that wishes to gain the trust and assent of their audiences—an online presence that appears incoherent and weak linguistically might, in many ways, be perceived as untrustworthy, as if the written word is a projection of potential ability.

The substance or quality of a group’s discourse relate to the group’s verbal competence. Building a verbally competent identity by means of quality content means providing audience members with useful information that is interesting and potent. This is nothing new to traditional rhetorical scholars who have always noted the importance of audience-centered information in persuasive discourse. Online, however, communicators may provide a much broader range of information in a variety of styles. The types of information made possible by the online environment seem endless, including product information, corporate publications, resource links, engaging news, chat sessions, advice and support, entertainment and games, audio and video clips, planners and calculators, customer reviews, blogs, and so on (Hogle, 2000). Providing user-centered information can engage their users and establish trust. In fact, Hogle suggested that when online communicators provide informational and not promotional items, users are more willing to perceive them as competent.

Using well-formed, strategic discourse is only one part of demonstrating competence. Design competence can be established by an appropriate and productive use of web technologies, but technologies that cloud the substance or make it difficult for users to accomplish their goals will result in lost credibility. One way to assure users
that the online resource is useful might be to display quality content that has an appropriate structure and arrangement. A website, for example, should be easily navigable. All links should work (i.e., should connect to another working site), the site should have at least one accessible internal search engine, and the site should be constructed logically and with purpose. Users, then, should never feel lost when looking for information. Offering the possibility for technical support can also help, but, in general, a site’s architecture is very important for establishing design competency. Those that do display a clear and organized arrangement of the site’s content, while adding well-designed backgrounds and images will make the hosting group look more capable and more worthy of trust. Critics should examine not just whether a group uses images on its website, but the way in which those images interact with the text. Regardless of the platform, groups that effectively use images to strengthen their textual appeals or effectively employ images as the message itself may appear more competent. This pertains to websites, but also online advertisements, blogs, Facebook pages, and even gaming media. Even one’s download speed can be important, which may show an awareness of the medium and a concern for users. Still another issue is that of consistency. Hunt (1996) contended that “many of the sites on the Web today are inconsistent in look and feel, and are illogical in information structure. As a result, the information these sites convey loses credibility” (p. 379). Ultimately, users might put more trust in an online organization that shows thought, rather than those that show carelessness. It seems reasonable to assume that users will return to those online platforms that have provided them with attractive, useful information and the means to find it.

Developing a website, Facebook page, Youtube account, Twitter feed, or blog is relatively easy, but designing a highly impactful and potent resource takes talent and hard work. Those who take their sites to this next level will be perceived as more competent. Verbal and design competency is certainly a valid component of ethos since online communicators must “look” like they can deliver on their promises to the community. Without it, credibility will wane: Political groups will lose supporters, religious groups will lose followers, university sites will not recruit new students, and commercial groups will lose customers.

CONCLUSION

Despite new ways to establish ethos and identity, and new ways to assess such attempts, the basic nature of ethos may not have changed much at all. Online media that represent the beneficial interests of some larger community still have a stronger ethos than those that do not. We also believe that, though the web has radically altered the ways in which we think of “author” and “message,” we still look for things such as moral character/ virtue and intelligence/ knowledgeability when trying to assess another’s credibility. So while early conjecture sought to persuade us that the online environment will change our entire way of thinking on the issue, it has not. The environment may have changed the ways in which users create ethos and identity, but what readers look for in a credible source has remained essentially the same since ancient times.

Some effort has been spent exploring the basic tenets of classical ethos. It seems safe to say that the classical concept of ethos as an audience’s perception of a speaker’s character is not outdated but perhaps limited given new media possibilities. The digital environment offers us new ways of building ethos, and now we have a new way to assess those capabilities. The exception to traditional theories of credibility is our addition of the concept of verbal and design competence, which must be taken into consideration if we are ever able to answer some reasonable questions about ethos and computer-mediated communication. When online rhetors design websites with sev-
eral hundred or even several hundred thousand pages, how are users to form judgments about their ethos? How does one get the “complete” picture when the majority of a group’s discourse is hidden from view or at least so massive in size that one cannot possibly attend to all of the information? Furthermore, whose ethos is really being judged when a group could have people external to the organization designing its identity or a number of outsourced writers who are under contract? Does it even matter who designs a group’s online presence? Will the future of new online media bring even more challenges to our concepts of character, trust, or credibility? During these complex transitions in the digital environment, the proposed model of assessing online ethos makes sense. Evaluating one’s attempts to create an identity based upon Community Identification and Goodwill, Moral Character and Virtue, Intelligence and Knowledge, and Verbal and Design Competence works well for CMC scholars who are trying to keep up with the constantly changing technological environment. CMC as we know it today will not exist in even five years. But no matter how the environment evolves, identifying how ethos works online will always be of consequence. Continued study of this new universe of possibilities is vital to realize those factors that are unchanging in the nature of persuasion, but also what factors are worth investigating as having altered our understanding of rhetoric.

REFERENCES


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**ADDITIONAL READING**


**KEY WORDS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Assessment Model**: A visual representation of an evaluative instrument meant to be applied to real-world events or activities.

**Community Identification and Goodwill**: An ethos-based appeal focused on building trust with a targeted audience by highlighting the similarities and common interests between rhetor and audience, and elaborating on the ways in which audience members may benefit through participation or interaction with the rhetor.

**Computer-Mediated Communication**: Either synchronous or asynchronous communication among individuals mediated through networked computer technology.

**Ethos**: Classical rhetorical concept formally defined by Aristotle, and related to an audience’s perception of a speaker’s character, derived through appeals to practical intelligence, goodwill, and virtue. Modern instances of the term are often connected to the ideas of identification, trust, dynamism, authority, habits of thought, attitude, and behavior, and a rhetor’s projection of self.

**Intelligence and Knowledge**: An ethos-based appeal focused on building trust with a targeted audience by highlighting the rhetor’s subject-based expertise, qualifications, and specialized knowledge.

**Moral Character and Virtue**: An ethos-based appeal focused on building trust with a targeted audience by highlighting the virtues that rhetor and audience have in common or those that appeal to an audience’s sensibilities.

**Verbal and Design Competence**: An ethos-based appeal focused on building trust with a targeted audience by highlighting the verbal and nonverbal skills of the rhetor for the purpose of establishing a professional and competent identity.