

Pedagogue Bonus: Contending with Misinformation (w/Jim Ridolfo)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

This Pedagogue Bonus episode is in collaboration with The Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival. The Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival is comprised of a group of academic podcasters and rhetoricians and compositionists that are coming together around a singular theme. This year's theme is "Contending with Misinformation in the Community and the Classroom."

In this bonus episode, I talk with Jim Ridolfo.

Jim Ridolfo is an Associate Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky, and is currently Director of Composition. He holds a PhD from Michigan State University in Rhetoric and Writing and his research focuses on the intersection of rhetorical theory and technology. He's an award-winning author, the author of four books, most recently *Rhet Ops: Rhetoric and Information Warfare* co-edited with William Hart-Davidson and published in 2019 by University of Pittsburgh Press.

Jim, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to talk about your book Rhet Ops. This book focuses on digital rhetoric and maybe even more specifically the weaponization of digital rhetorics. So it looks at the effects of digital rhetoric and the consequences of misinformation. You write this in your introduction, and I want to spend our time answering and addressing these questions. You write, "How do we teach our students to be critical consumers and creators of weaponized social media? How do we teach undergraduates and graduates to spot and trace influence campaigns in real time?" So your book goes on to explore these questions, and I was hoping we could spend time here addressing them and talking more about how our pedagogies, how we as writing teachers, how writing students, and how our writing classes ought to adapt and transform based on these digital realities and how we can contend with misinformation in the writing classroom.

JR: Thanks, Shane, for having me on. I've been a huge fan of your podcast for a long time, and it's really cool to be talking with you about this. I'll start off by talking about what we believe is a base assumption for the collection, which is that increasingly our digital spaces are being used and weaponized in various ways, and that our students, our past students and our current students, are likely already passive consumers of weaponized social media. And they may also unknowingly, or knowingly in some cases, amplify that social media.

So one of the first things that we would say we should start doing more of is getting students to identify that that's happening. And one of the ways that we think about this as happening more and more often in digital spaces is just based on the cost aspect. And that was, I think, one point that Bill and I was trying to make in the introduction of this collection is that weaponized social media is incredibly cheap, especially in relationship to analog counterparts of the past. And

because it's so cheap, it's happening more and more, and it's being deployed by more and more actors, whether it's state or non-state actors, or individuals.

So one of the examples of that, and I think one of the ways that we think about in our pedagogy to make students aware that this is happening, is through looking at case examples. One that comes to mind is one that you might've heard of that was during the 2020 campaign, somebody had domain squat on antifa.com and had in a certain moment in August of 2020 begin to redirect to joe Biden.com. And it's one of those, let's say "operations," if you will, that's really cheap. The actual domain squatting, if we were to think about it in terms of how long somebody was possibly squatting on that domain for, let's say if it's 10 years, we're looking at maybe 10 years of registration fees with network information or another registrar. That's maybe \$100 or \$200.

But the effect of that, especially at that kairotic moment in the campaign, is this pseudo evidence that there is some kind of link between Joe Biden and Antifa that then gets recast in all these different social media across different networks, whether it's Twitter, Facebook or, anything else. So the cost of that is so low, but the ability to see this happening in real time and understand it and explain it to others is something that's difficult to do right now. And it's one of those things that we need to be able to do more quickly in real time as a public, as many publics. So that's one of the examples.

Another one that comes to mind is last week the Biden Administration was talking about the disproportionate impact of 12 different accounts on Facebook in terms of the amplification of anti-vaccination rhetoric. When you think about that, these 12 different accounts, how much does that actually cost? If we were to think about those as campaigns that are funded campaigns, is it as much as a fighter jet? Is it as much as some kind of ballistic missile? These are much more cost-effective, unfortunately, things that could be done to sow discord, damage public, damage countries, but they're happening more and more often. The burden of hindsight and the burden of proof, especially in things that are happening in real time, is a real problem.

So in the class that I teach on rhetoric information warfare, one of the things that I try and walk through with students is to look at case examples like that, that are maybe recent or happening in real time to talk about them and look them and track them. Conspirador Norteño on Twitter is one account that tracks those in real time in terms of botnet influence and things like that on campaigns. The media information guide that MIT just put out has lots of different case examples too, that you can walk students through. That's one of the ways that I try to approach that.

The last time I taught this class was in spring of 2019. I'm teaching it again this coming spring, and what I try and do is I try and look at what's happening in terms of the current weekly events and find things that are happening that students can track in terms of hashtags or activity around a text. That's in real time that we can then do report backs on class. So, one example that I used to use was I would look at the current active editing history of Wikipedia pages in real time. So we go from week to week and look at the activity of how a page is being acted upon in terms of the edits and things like that by different actors. So that's an example of activity around the text in Wikipedia, but then we would take it to say, for example, there's one social media platform in

particular, RocketDock, and then look at what's happening in terms of the various patterns of activity and things like that.

That's where some of the data scientists come in handy. Alexandria Lockett had just had a really good chapter in *Race, Rhetoric, and Research Methods* that talked about Black Twitter. That might be a good reading to pair it with. So there's all sorts of ways that we can take a look at that. But what's changed for me is in 2006, when I was looking at a comprehensive online document evaluation, I did a piece in *Kairos* on that. I was looking at standalone servers and standalone websites, and I wasn't looking at proprietary social media networks activity around them. So, we were looking at tracer route and looking at the location of servers, which is still useful, but that doesn't really get us to the full story of activity around texts now, especially as they're mostly happening in closed box proprietary networks.

There's some things that have become more important since then, like for example, DNS history databases, which are expensive to subscribe to, but really important in terms of researching the activity around domain name. That becomes more important. But then looking at the specifics of Safiya Noble and algorithmic operations inside of networks becomes even more important than anything I talked about in 2006. It's one of those things where I think that every 18 months, we're sort of reassessing our relationship to digital text in different digital environments in terms of authenticity and how we understand activity around them. So whatever I would say we should do right now in terms of pedagogical practice, it'll probably be out of date in 18 months anyways.