

## **The Legitimacy of Digital Rhetoric: Getting the message across bit by bit**

"...this is the moment to make history as educators and students, as citizens of a "wired" world, to stretch and break the boundaries, to explore, poke and prod the evocative, extra-sensory medium of multimedia and treat it as a credible mode of thought, research and rhetoric. " –CK Tower, 10/30/2006

That's where I was two months ago as I began to build my multimedia piece on hunger and poverty in America. As I am wrapping the project up, every word still stands. I've shared my project with my WRA 415 class, several co-workers and my family. The general reaction is that the piece is strong and evocative and also eye-opening and informative. The later make me hopeful that I will achieve my ultimate goal with this project, which is to inspire people to act against poverty and hunger. I think this is a reasonable expectation, given that the piece provides multiple options for people to get involved, which include a very simple and compelling option of visiting The Hunger Site online.

The Hunger Site makes for an appealing option for people who understand the need to help others, but who might be struggling themselves to get by. It's a digital tool of empowerment in that not only can you make a contribution yourself, every day, you can also tell other people about it and build a network of people who are raising awareness for themselves and others. It's a powerful medium for making change in the world, when you consider that to date, 150 million users of the site have clicked to give 250 million cups of food to the world's hungry.<sup>1</sup> I believe that participation in an online activist network, like The Hunger Site, has the power to inspire other forms of activism, too. Yet, just that simple click everyday is worthwhile and makes a difference. For me, if I have inspired even one person to go and click everyday to help fight hunger, then this project has been worthwhile and successful.

Although my primary goal in doing this multimedia project was to inspire activism, I learned a lot of other things while working on it, too. Without access to all the facts, figures, data and photos on or related to hunger in America and world wide, I never could have created this piece. Further, had it only been available to me through direct permission from the authors, I could not have created the piece. In reading over the "Crash Course on Copyright," from our week nine readings, I think that the work I have created is covered under fair use, since it was created as a class assignment, but I am not sure if I am protected if I distribute it. Do I plan to distribute it anyway, yes, but before I do so, I will make sure I have included attribution for every piece of material I have used to create this piece. The most important thing I learned is just how important it is to have everything on

the Web available not just for research but also for remix. I plan to make my project available to anyone who might want to use it for something else.

A realization that came to me while working on this project is that the work I was doing was real and legitimate work. This came as a surprise to me, since I have been working in multimedia since the mid to late nineties. I produced and edited one of the first online literary journals, when that community was just starting out and struggling for legitimacy. Yet, when I started WRA 415 and saw that some previous students had done multimedia projects, I thought, awesome, I'm going to be able to do this and not have to write some boring, stuffy paper. I never considered I was going to be able to craft scholarly work in a different way—I do now. Through the coursework and the class readings, lecture and discussion, I now have a far greater appreciation for digital expression as rhetoric and scholarly expression. Although my project took many hours of technical refining, it was no less an act of analyzing and crafting an argument, viewpoint or message, then had I written a research paper, or done a traditional critical analysis.

This realization has been a break through for me, one I am very grateful for. It has led me to the thought that perhaps my whole graduate education might be more than I thought it could be. I fervently hope that I continue to have experiences like this throughout the rest of my graduate work. And I suppose some of that is up to me to make happen. I just hope I have the opportunity for more experiences that challenge me to think and consider more about the possibilities of digital rhetoric in my professional work and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Frequently Asked Questions. The Hunger Site. [www.thehungersite.com](http://www.thehungersite.com).