"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

ENGL 232: Writing for the Public Sphere

Professor Russell A. Potter

T/Th 10:00-11:50 AM, Craig-Lee 206

If this course were to have been offered twenty years ago, the "public sphere"would have meant newspapers, television, radio, and print publication. The primary way for an ordinary person to enter into such discourse would be through one or another formal gateway: a letter to the editor, a guest column or Op-Ed piece, an interview on television or radio, an essay in a magazine or journal, or that thing once known as a "book." There were, it's true, some more open ways to reach a wider audience: college radio, public-access cable, or xeroxed 'zines -- but they tended to have a very limited reach.

Today in 2013, for better or worse, the potential reach of any text or media presentation is, for all practical purposes, infinite; anyone on earth can "publish" a text, and most other people on earth can access it. And yet, in terms of actually getting one's text to an audience, it's harder than ever, precisely because there is so much already out there, and very few single outlets that guarantee the kind of mass audience that used to be available via "old" media. We are all public speakers/writers, but the size of our forum is so vast -- and yet so small -- that our "public" is likely to be a smaller and less diverse group than at any time in recent history. The battle now is not to merely be 'published' as such, but to be noticed.

So called "social media" have advanced and changed considerably in the past two decades, and many fundamental changes are still well within living memory. This class will explore all of these differences, making use of every possible kind of resource and media available. To that end, everyone in this class will experiment with every media platform available, including but not limited to Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Wikipedia, Google+ and Reddit. Each of us will create and interlink an online public identity, and use that identity to explore, test, and respond to the possibilities of public discourse today. We'll also, along the way, learn something of the history of earlier social media, with the hope that these will help us put the present in some kind of perspective, even as we recognize that some aspects of it are new and scarcely tried. We'll also function as a collective, sharing our own texts and experiences with each other, and following each other's progress through the world-wide electronic jungle.

In keeping with the mission of this course, each student's online work will be graded via online feedback, peer critiques, and instructor evaluations. There will also be several brief reflective essays. The final grade will be based on all these materials, treated and evaluated as a portfolio of work.

READINGS

There are <u>no</u> required books for the class; most of our readings will be online materials; current articles and short readings may be assigned on an *ad hoc* basis. However, I do have a brief list of books that I recommend, and that you may choose to get on your own, and have mentioned some of these in the syllabus as "RR" for recommended reading. Titles marked with an asterisk (*) are available free via the eBrary system at RIC:

Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* *
Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*
Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility & Other Writings on Media*
Erik Barnouw, *The Sponsor*
William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*
Gane and Beer, *Key Concepts: New Media* *
Hassan and Thomas, *New Media Theory Reader* *

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week I (Jan. 21, 23) Tuesday: Introduction to class. Thursday: History of writing, technology, and social media. RR for this week and next: Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, "Writing Restructures Consciousness," and "Print, Space, and Closure" In-class viewing: Book 1.0.

Week II (Jan. 28, 29). Tuesday: History of pre-digital "social" media – the letter, the invitation, the bulletin, the magazine, the newspaper, the telegraph. Thursday: Survival of old media in the new media age.

Week III (Feb. 4, 6) Tuesday: Evolution of the Internet from APRANET to the BBS to FTP, earliest forms of online publication. Thursday: The digital difference -- Social media from 1990 to the present.

Week IV (Feb. 11, 13) The constructed self: "Real" people, sock puppets, spam accounts, and avatars.

Week V. (Feb. 18, 20) The constructed audience: "Followers," "friends," and feedback. Styles of response: acolytes, engagers, naysayers, and trolls.

Week VI (Feb. 25, 27) Replication, property, and persistence, from the printing press to the cloud. Overview of copyright as it affects digital media. RR: Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age …" (essay only).

Week VII (March 4, 6) The outlaws: hackers, spammers, and media jammers. Yes Men, Guerilla Girlz, Wikileaks, and Aaron Swartz.

SPRING BREAK

Week VIII (March 18, 20) Tuesday: The old line of social media: E-mail, static www pages, weblogs. Thursday: The emerging new line: FaceBook vs. MySpace.

Week IX (March 25, 27) Short and sweet: Mini-messaging and media. Texting, SMS, RSS, chatbots, and Tweets.

Week X (April 1, 3) Effect of modern media on long forms: The article, the essay, the future of the book.

Week XI (April 8, 10) You've seen the movie, you've read the e-book – now taste the soft drink! Interaction, amplification, and marketing in the new media age.

Week XII (April 15, 17) The sponsor: From Behemoth to munchkin. "Can the Internet Sell Soap?" RR: Barnouw, *The Sponsor*.

Week XIII (April 22, 24) Future trends in new media and writing. RR: Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

Week XIV (April 29, May 1) Concluding discussions