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RHETORICAL STRATEGIES ON WWW.IREPORT.COM

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Abstract

The study concentrates on the phenomenon of user-generated content on the internet. The article presents an introductory analysis of various rhetorical strategies used by the authors of commentaries on one of the popular user-contributory sites, i.e. www.iReport.com. The analysis of this site shows that there exists a range of diverse means of expression used by the enthusiasts of broadcasting online, involving the submission of written articles, live video commentaries, audio files and cartoons. The study shows that users shape the features of the content in different manners and resort to the use of a variety of rhetorical devices. To the main properties of discourse belong personalization, interactivity, use of figurative and vivid language.

As the title suggests, the study aims to review the rhetorical strategies used in online commentaries on www.iReport.com, a user-generated website. The research focuses on examples of user-created content on the web specifically, because it is in this medium that the phenomenon has seen a dynamic increase.

My aim was to examine the means which amateur commentators use in order to present the news, opinions and commentaries and also the degree to which they exploit the affordances of the internet. I hypothesized that the lack of editorial insight and also the technological possibilities should encourage the contribution of uninhibited, unrestrained and deeply varied content.

I. User-generated content

The phenomenon of user-participation in the creation of online content has developed significantly during the last few years, due to the affordances of internet

technologies. The advent of Web 2.0 technologies, which contributed to the widespread use of easy publishing tools and mobile devices, has played a special role in the spread of this phenomenon. Web 2.0, in contrast to its predecessor, Web 1.0, places more emphasis on the content produced by users, on their active participation in information exchange and their contribution of various data to websites (cf. Cormode and Krishnamurthy 2008, Harrison and Barthel 2009). In this way, the online audience has turned into an active participant in the process of producing online content and publishing commentaries and other type of data (Bowman and Willis 2003: 7). The Web 2.0 applications include video-sharing web sites, such as YouTube, networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, collaborative knowledge portals and encyclopedias, such as Knol or H2G2.

II. iReport.com

For the following study, I chose one of the popular user-contributory sites, i.e. iReport.com. The headline of the site – “Unedited. Unfiltered. News” – describes the basic characteristics of the project. The content of the site is generated by users and is not moderated by the editors before its publication. Moderation of the news can be performed after the message has been published on the website, as the community has the right to block a message if it is vulgar or defamatory. The basic and most conspicuous characteristic of the site is semiotic intertextuality, as it presents both textual, audio and video content. Still images dominate on the site, especially live commentaries and graphic representations. (Fig. 1.)

What follows is an introductory content analysis of the project in question. The material for the following analysis comprises 243 messages which achieved the status of the most viewed and most commented in August and September 2009. To the most frequent channels of expression belong video files, graphic messages and textual commentaries. Due to a heterogeneous shape of the site, the study required the application of different methods of analysis of the content. In the following research, we present the most conspicuous properties of each of the types of the comments, presenting content analysis of the page, with special focus on the linguistic properties of the messages, i.e. their discourse properties, syntactic and lexical features. This description should be treated as an introductory presentation of the research area in question, as each of the channels of expression calls for a more profound study of their shape.

The first look at the collection of the messages proves that it is considerably varied, ranging from plain, commonplace messages to very sophisticated commentaries and complex video files. The posts are characterized by ingenuity and daring, which is a direct consequence of the freedom of publication on the site. Since the authors are not constrained and influenced by editors or gatekeepers, they can enjoy a significantly greater autonomy in the choice of the subject and shape of the message. A review of the messages allows us to observe that the authors resort to the use of different rhetorical devices to present their point of view and to influence the audience.

1. Video files (56%, 136 messages)

As mentioned above, video files belong to the most frequent channels exploited by the authors. On average, every 2 minutes a new movie is added to the site, which is a sign of the dynamic activity of the community of users. The messages transmitted in the movies as well as the behaviour of the users deserve closer attention as they exhibit interesting properties. The most conspicuous features of the language of video messages are personalization, interactivity, as well as figurative and vivid style.

1.1 Personalization

The first feature worth noting is the personalization of the posts. The commentaries have a strong personal touch. The authors quote stories of their own life and present their personal experiences. This feature, characteristic of the majority of the posts in the material analyzed, can be illustrated in the movie posted by a user named OCGirl, presenting a commentary on the celebration of Mother's Day. (Fig. 2.)

Hey everybody

I am not only a super mom but I'm a cool mom as well. And the reason I say that is that ever since my boys were small I have never ever grounded them. And the reason I have never believed in grounding my boys is that when you just ground somebody and send them to a room or have them stand in the corner your are not really teaching them to resolve issues so whenever my boys get into a fight or argue with each other I literally have them talk it out like in a presidential debate. That's what I do is because I think that the earlier we can start communication with kids at a younger age the more it can help them for the rest of their lives.

The author of this message concentrates on herself, quotes her personal experiences with raising children and cites her methods of educating them. Personalization is visible in the frequent references to the self, in the use of 1st person pronouns (*I'm a super mom, I teach them, my boys*). She tries to convince the viewer that she is right in her approach and encourages him/her to follow her methods. This may be also observed in the opposition between *I* and *you*, which she introduces (*when you ground somebody...*), in order to prove that what *you* do is wrong. A further point is the use of inclusive *we* (*the earlier we can start communication...*), which stands for the group of parents or caretakers who are all encouraged to act in the manner proposed by the speaker.

1.2 Interactivity

The aforementioned references to viewers signal a further characteristic of the messages apart from personalization, that is their profoundly dialogical and interactive nature. The authors in the messages posted on the site frequently provoke the audience and invite the readers to enter into a discussion and to exchange opinions. The dialogical character of the messages is manifested in direct references to viewers, in questions directed at listeners, in the use of the 1st and 2nd person plural pronouns (e.g. *we, you*). All these means enhance the contact of the authors with the receivers and mark solidarity with them.

1.3 Figurative style

The authors, in order to make their expressions more vivid, frequently resort to the use of figurative language – incorporating analogies, metaphors or similes. For instance, the user identified as Adriana presented a video in which she expresses just one sentence – *the pig is already in the air and has already landed*. Though the commentary is short, it is meaningful and rich in content, and can be seen as an example of a double metaphor. In this statement, the user refers to two important events which were hotly discussed on the internet, i.e. the flight of the President's airplane above Manhattan and the spread of the so-called swine flu at the end of April. In this short and simple message she expressed her negative attitude towards the flight of the plane, which terrified many people and brought back the events of 9/11. At the same time though, she has passed on the news about the first instance of the virus confirmed in the USA (the pig has landed, i.e. the virus has come).

This particular tendency towards figurativeness of description and also exemplification of certain phenomena can be seen in the following movie, in which the author describes the state of American economic situation by comparing it to an airplane. (Fig. 3.)

You know our nation, is really nothing more than a big fancy airliner flying in the sky. It has a number of things that make it work. It has two wings – a right wing and a left wing, it has a tail which is a kind of centre of things. And most important it has a pilot who controls. Our nation and this airplane is on a diet now caused by a failing economy. The airplane is beginning to spin and fall towards the earth. Now it's a time that all the various parts must stay intact and connected to the airplane. And the pilot, whoever that person is, we have to trust that he knows what he's doing. People from the back of the plane should be deterred from rushing up and grabbing the controls. More than one person on the controls can lead to serious problem of confusion. At a very critical time this nation must pull together, because if the airplane doesn't stay together the chances of pulling it out of the dark are rather remote my friend.

As the author states – America, just like an airplane, has two wings (political parties), the centre, and the pilot (the President) who controls the flight. Due to the economic crisis, American industry is deteriorating – that is the plane has started to go down. The speaker uses the extended simile, which has certain features of allegory as well, to make the message more evocative to viewers and thus to encourage cooperation in the nation and trust in the President in order to go through the difficult period. The user resorts as well to non-verbal means of expression. The message he wants to transmit is enhanced by his appearance, as he is wearing a pilot's cap.

1.4 Vivid style

The user quoted above, who calls himself Dimmit, is especially creative. In his live comments, he often applies additional, non-verbal strategies to supplement and intensify his message. This can be seen in the following post where he presents his opinion on gun control in America, holding a gun in his hand and wearing another characteristic cap. (Fig. 4.)

There's nothing that makes me feel more secure than my gun. I feel manly when I hold it. It's an AKC 40 caliber Mauser Revolver. And I've even taken lessons on how to shoot it, I went to one of those safety classes. I hear people talking of gun control. I didn't like to idea of gun control, but then many years ago one man climbed up a tower of one of the prestigious universities and started shooting people with a long gun and I said, My God, we need to control these bloody things, so I've given a though all over the years and the reality is this, we cannot control the gun. It's been invented, the same as the computer has been invented. It's really hard to uninvent something, once it is, so if anybody could present a plan of gun control that would really work, then I might be for it. But the reality is there's no way to control the guns. We just control the guns of the honest people, not the bad guys – they'll always get the guns, and there's nothing worse than to be in a situation when the other guy's got a gun and is shooting at you and you don't have a gun. It's just a bad position to be in. So, I won't support gun control, unless somebody comes with a plan that really works.

Due to the non-verbal means used, the message is presented with exceptional vividness, which is additionally enhanced by the deeply rhetorical nature of the expression. The tone of the message is intensely persuasive – with the very first sentence, which is a strong assertion about the importance of the gun in his life, the user tries to convince the viewer of the advantages of possessing a gun. Similarly, the next sentence, though simple and short, expresses a close association between the possession of a weapon and masculinity. The user also resorts to straightforward statements of truth, such as *the reality is this, we cannot control the gun, there's no way to control the guns*, etc. These strong affirmations are to convince the addressee that no other solution to the problem is possible. In addition, persuasive tone of the message is achieved by the exemplification of the message with real-life situations, where the user quotes both authentic events (gunfire at university) and fictitious, yet probable, situations. Rhetorical nature of this post is combined with orality and informality, which are manifested in the presence of interjections, the use of colloquialisms and contractions.

This video also illustrates the above-mentioned personalization – the user quotes his own feelings and experiences associated with the possession of a gun (the use of personal pronouns *I, my, me*). There are also elements of interactivity to be found – when he refers to the viewers directly (*the other guy is shooting at you and you don't have a gun*).

In both cases, the non-verbal strategies support the textual message, highlight and enhance the point being made and make it more effective. The introduction of unexpected effects at the end (i.e. the user is lighting a cigarette and suddenly the “smoke police” knock on the door, at which point he chooses to use his gun) aim at achieving maximum appeal and originality of the message.

The use of figurative and vivid language, and the use of non-verbal means of expression make the messages more expressive, eye-catching and appealing, but also easier to digest by the users, and bring the message closer to their concrete experience. They help convince listeners and persuade them towards accepting the viewpoint of the author. Thus, they enhance the expressive function of the message, as well as its

impressive and aesthetic functions. Their role is to influence the viewers' opinions, to amaze and / or surprise them and to affect their imagination.

These videos illustrate different approaches toward the form of the presentations. On the one side, we have the presentations recorded in plain rooms and halls without much care devoted to the background or to the appearance of the speaker. On the other side, the rooms are carefully designed, perhaps recording studios, with well-thought out scenography and ornamentation of the message. These examples show that the introduction of video commentary allows the authors to achieve a more credible and direct experience than would be possible with text messages alone.

2. Graphic representations (23%, 55 posts)

In addition to live commentaries, users present their opinions and comments in graphic form, i.e. with a cartoon or a drawing. Although such forms are also present in traditional media, the online drawings deserve mentioning due to their great variation and the creativity of their authors. The lack of the above mentioned editorial restraints allows users not to be constrained by standard conventions or rules of political correctness.

In designing their pictures, the authors utilize a variety of means of expression, among which, the following are the most frequent:

1. The use of cultural symbols, characters and book heroes

The first frequent means of expression is by reference to common film and book heroes, e.g.:

- a. famous movie doctors – the author of the collage uses popular doctor-characters from movies and cartoons (e.g. Dr Quinn, Dr House, Dr Hibbert), suggesting that their help could be sought in the face of swine-flu. (Fig. 5.)
- b. Star Trek – the author refers to the characters of Star Trek to describe the activities of the Democrats. He compares the party to the Borg (i.e. an integrated collective formed through forced assimilation; they do not exhibit a desire for negotiation or reason). (Fig. 6.)
- c. Hulk – comparing President Barack Obama to the Incredible Hulk, as a reaction to the overuse of the word *outrage* by the President. (Fig. 7.)

2. Usage of cultural symbols in word plays

Users as well refer to cultural symbols, as in the following picture, where the title *Encyclopedia Baracobama* can be seen as a blend of the proper name *Barack Obama* and the noun *Americana*, thus being a clear reference to the *Encyclopedia Americana*. (Fig. 8.)

3. Drawings describing recent events

A further frequent method of expressing one's opinion via an image is the use of drawings. In Fig. 9, the user shows a negative attitude to the extensive coverage

of the news concerning the spread of swine flu, which is broadcast at the expense of the discussion of other problems.

Graphic representations frequently have the role of supplementing textual messages, which constitute the last type of files.

3. Textual messages (21%, 52 messages)

These messages comprise only textual content. As such they exhibit similar characteristics to the posts which can be found on discussion forums. The basic characteristics of these posts are their informality and a high degree of emotiveness and expressiveness.

As far as the content of these posts is concerned, we may distinguish two main content areas – i.e. personal experiences and current world affairs.

1. Messages concentrating on the self – personal experiences (54%, 28 posts)

This group of messages concentrates on the presentation of personal experiences; the authors concentrate on the self and on the revelation of subjective feelings, e.g.:¹

My mother was an aspiring actress in Hollywood. She gave up when she got married to my Dad. If she were still here I would ask her why she gave up because it would be fun to tell people my mother is an actress. :)

i love Pontiacs! I've always liked them since I was 4 years old & my dad had a '69 firebird. I also drove a '74 pontiac grand prix when I was 13. I've had 2 bonne's, grand prix, trans-am, & gto. Loved every single one of 'em!

When I was growing up, I had a fascination with the stars and astronomy. My Grandpa bought me about the constellations and taught me to identify Orion, the Big and Little Dippers and find the North Star.

These messages illustrate the above-mentioned personalization of the posts. Clearly, the posts represent the authors' strong need for self-expression.

2. Messages directed at particular addressees (46%, 24 messages)

Very often the posts take the format of a message or a letter, directed at a specific person. These messages contain statements of opinion and raise questions concerning current affairs. Obviously, the questions are rhetorical in nature and their function is solely expressive. They also contribute to creating an illusion of a dialogical and interactive situation, e.g.:

Dear President

My name is Zeeshan Usmani, and I have a quick question to ask. Why can't we solve the problem we have created for ourselves? and why we have to beg to USA everytime anything goes wrong in Pakistan? I appreciate your time, Thank You

¹ All the messages are quoted in their original form, keeping the errors made by the authors.

Hi Larry.

I just have a few questions all related. I know you have time restraints and all but when you ask your guests a question on your show, why don't you let them answer before you interrupt them, you do this all the time. Oprah does the same thing and it really bothers me. Do you think they are either boring answers or long winded? Why is this done so often?

I didn't vote for you but I do appreciate that you are the right person at the right time for what must be the ugliest job in the world right now. Heck, I'd even forgive you if you took up smoking again.

The rhetorical nature of the messages is confirmed by the following passage which exemplifies the features presented above, i.e. the personalization and dialogical character of the text:

May I ask you when you will stop this genocide, women and kids are paying the price of your actions, your Nation is being hurt daily, what about your own family and your own daughters, would you ever imagined you would have been born a woman, what would be your position if you were born a woman, why do you let your own people kill and treat women like less than an animal,
I am asking too much,
to respect your own people and specially kids and women,
what will you do next,
what will be your agreement with the leaders of the world,
what are you waiting to change your position re this crazy war, and what is your position re Pakistan, well that is an obvious one,
what is exactly what you want to get with this non stop violence, haven't you see or you don't care the way you're people are suffering.....
yes politics and rulling a Country can be very dirty,
but I really would like to know how do you feel as a human being,
I bet you don't feel,
because if you were a true religious man,
you wouldn't be doing what you are doing to your people and to your brothers in faith.....

This user, in contrast to Dimmit, who tried to present rational arguments for his opinions, resorts solely to emotional persuasion. The message, deeply emotional in tone, takes the form of a stream of consciousness, presenting an unsegmented flow of thoughts. Basically, it delineates the complaints associated with the social situation in Pakistan in the form of an accumulation of questions and accusations directed at the President of the country. The questions have a different character, being both deliberative and persuasive. They range from direct questions concerning particular problems (*what will be your agreement with the leaders of the world*), to conditional questions regarding unreal situations (*what would be your position if you were born a woman*). In three places, the list of questions is interrupted by ironic acknowledgments of truth and an ostensible agreement (*well, that is an obvious one, yes politics and ruling a country can be very dirty*). These suspension points help leave certain things unsaid and achieve the effect

of reticence. In the message we can see the elements of doubt, rejection, and evaluation. The user refers to common moral values, focusing on an emotional, not rational evaluation of reality.

As far as the form of these posts is concerned, their major characteristics include the following:

a. high frequency of 1st person pronouns, e.g.:

I became an avid Sci Fi fan early on and joined the Science Fiction Book Club when I was in 7th grade.

I never thought I would ever say this but I think Adam is the first guy I have ever seen that looks good in makeup. I think he could open the door for more men to wear it.

100 days in office, you have done so well. Africans will go on singing your victory.

In Africa you are my Kenyan Brother, President Barack Obama and My beautiful sister, The First Lady Michelle Obama.

b. contractions, as signals of casual, colloquial style, e.g.:

haven't you see or you don't care the way you're people are suffering.....

I don't feel the makeup made him look feminine at all.

c. exclamatory sentences, emphatic repetitiveness, use of different rhetorical devices, such "the list of three", e.g.:

Great job President Obama!! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!

WELL, SORT OF... AND I REALLY LOVE MY CITY!!!

d. rhetorical questions, e.g.:

Could the picture not have been made using photoshop and existing images???
Why waste millions in tax payer money???

e. emphasis, expressed by means of capital letters, e.g.:

YOU HAVE BOTH BECOME THE ROLE MODEL FOR OUR AFRICAN CHILDREN AND OUR AFRICAN LEADS.

f. wordplay, e.g.:

The best way to end the mess we are in is to start by making NOBAMA and his freak followers the NOBAMAITES as long as this MISERABLE FAILURE is in office we are bound for disaster.

where *NOBAMA* and *NOBAMAITES* may be seen as instances of blending, while the *MISERABLE FAILURE* is a further example of emphasis described above.

All these features point to the deeply informal and also the emotional nature of the posts. The expressive nature of these statements is emphasized by an excessive use of punctuation marks (suspension points, exclamation marks, question marks) and capital letters. These examples show that textual commentaries, similar to video files, are subjective, emotional and exhibit a deeply dialogical character. Worth noting are frequent grammatical and spelling mistakes.

4. Conclusions

Taken together, interactivity and personalization are the most important features characteristic of the posts. The interactive nature can be seen in direct reference to listeners, in the usage of 1st and 2nd person plural pronouns (*we, you*), which are used to highlight common experiences and create a sense of comradeship with the receivers. In addition, worth noting is the frequent use of questions of different types, such as deliberative questions, expressing the dilemmas of the speaker, persuasive questions and finally, rhetorical questions, by means of which users express their judgments. All these aim at influencing the user, and their interactive and dialogical formulas constitute an attractive means of expressing personal evaluations in a covert way.

The material analysed lets us see that iReport commentaries present a deeply personalized view. In the majority of the messages, the authors focus on the presentation of the self and the description of personal experiences. It seems that participatory sites are treated as the perfect place for satisfying the need for self-expression, for turning to a wider audience and becoming known in the media.

Interestingly, there is a frequent lack of matter-of-fact argumentation and of rational judgments. The majority of the posts rely solely on emotional persuasion that aims to influence the emotional attitudes of the receivers. The use of colloquial language predominates in the messages, making the commentaries easier to follow.

It seems, though, that the personal and emotional side actually decides about the popularity of such collaborative projects. Viewers seem to appreciate the originality of the posts and the human texture permeating through the messages.

Yet, it is not only personalization and interactivity that decide the popularity of the site. Its value is additionally enhanced by its multimedia character and the multitude of the channels of expression available. The site is a symbiosis of textual, audio and visual media and it constitutes a clear confirmation of the popularity of visual culture. The written word is here dominated by images, which are downloaded to the website every few minutes. The users seem to appreciate the array of the multimedia available, which are visible in the form of their messages. The majority of the users want to stand out from other authors and strive for maximum appeal of their messages. This focus on attractiveness is especially noticeable in the video files. Here, the authors present live shows. These posts assume the character of an interactive performance.

The freedom to publish anything enhances creativity. It contributes to a greater diversity of content and enables a more intensive exchange of opinions. Naturally, this freedom can have a different, negative side. The lack of control creates favourable

conditions for the publication of defamatory and inappropriate messages, which frequently appear on the site. Additionally, it needs to be acknowledged that the site is rich in useless and meaningless content. This contributes to the growing trivialization of the online content. The discovery of a valuable contribution often constitutes a real challenge.

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Fig. 1. iReport home page (www.iReport.com, 20th September 2009)



Fig. 2. OCGirl's commentary (www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-236314, 22nd September 2009)



Fig. 3. Dimmit's commentary (www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-219776, 15th September 2009)



Fig. 4. Dimmit's commentary (www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-240815, 15th September 2009)



Fig. 5. www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-250957, 27th September 2009



Fig. 6. www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-255639, 28th September 2009



Fig. 7. www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-251163, 28th September 2009

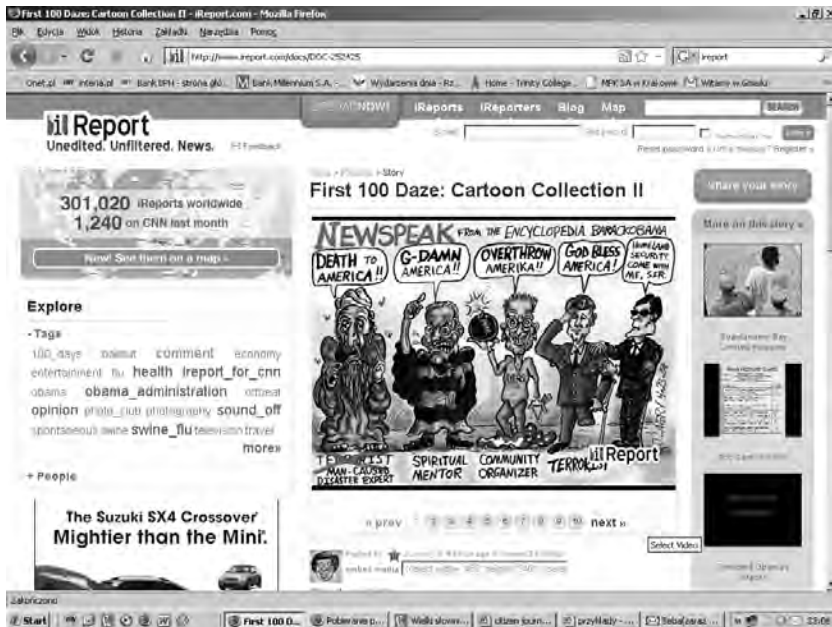


Fig.8. www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-252425, 29th September 2009



Fig. 9. www.iReport.com/docs/DOC-255608, 27th September 2009