Response to Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s “The Coaxing Architecture of Reddit’s r/science”

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The central question of this provocative essay is one that drives most inquiry in rhetorical epistemology: How do those who know things talk with those who do not, and how do the latter evaluate the merits of what the former have to say? This question has always in part been about context, but, as Moriarty and Mehlenbacher demonstrate, contemporary networked culture makes context particularly influential in practices of interpretation. The virtual sites in which experts and lay publics encounter one another are built to facilitate the evaluation of expertise in certain ways, which by necessity forecloses other ways. Rhetoric’s “architectonic” functions, as Richard McKeon would say, are for this reason extra salient in public engagements with expertise online.

Virtual Affordances

According to Moriarty and Mehlenbacher, the popular content-sharing website Reddit and in particular the subreddit called “The New Reddit Journal of Science” (aka r/science), provide visitors with structural mechanisms for evaluating the professional or academic quality of individual scientists. Moriarty and Mehlenbacher refer to these mechanisms as “architectural affordances” serving as interpretive heuristics. And they argue that “Reliance on these ethos-assessment heuristic makes it easy for redditors to make snap-judgments about whether a participating scientist is an expert, enabling them to instead invest their cognitive resources into comprehending the scientific discussions and arguments found in the AMA [or, “Ask Me Anything” portion of the subreddit]” (2).

Pondering Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s claim that virtual affordances move visitors’ labor from one burden (evaluating the scientist) to another opportunity (engaging in complex scientific discussion), I have to ask: But do they? Do redditors spend the cognitive resources they have saved on evaluation on engagement? Is the attention economy of the World Wide Web governed by a trickle down dynamic? So, right from the beginning, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher intrigue.

Commendable about Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s essay is that it moves the larger project of studying digital rhetorics of epistemology forward. In so doing, it achieves more than the article-length pairing of concept and event. It provides a point of view for scholars with similar questions and analytic resources. I appreciate that the authors have chosen a venue of scientific discourse addressed to the general public that differs from the generic format of deliberative bodies. Oftentimes when scholars investigate how, when, and where scientists and laypersons communicate, the case study or artifact is so constrained by institutional procedures that the communicative event itself is indiscernible. For example, although studying expert testimony in political situations provides a point of view on how scientists translate their expertise for public utility, it does not situate science-to-public interactions in everyday life. It compartmentalizes expertise (both science and policy) in ways that may not reflect expert practices in/through networked culture. Taking a prominent site like Reddit, which contains a range of subjects and subjectivities, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s essay troubles conventional distinctions not only between expert and non-expert sites of invention, but also between high and low culture. The same can be said for the appealing way in which they conceptualize “redditors,” or reddit-users, whose participatory
interventions are central to the rhetoric of Reddit. The idea of “redditors” indeed blurs the line between information users and producers.

**Conceptual Framing and Comparative Significance**

My concerns reading Moriarty and Mehlenbacher pertain primarily to conceptual framing and comparative significance. For instance, despite sincere attempts to recruit Aristotelian terminology, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s essay perpetuates confusion about expertise and ethos. It goes to considerable length trying to distinguish the two, but in so doing the authors still only account for a superficial understanding of ethos as personal credibility. They write, “[F]or contemporary society which is more dependent than ever on specialized knowledge for technological and scientific advancement, deference to expertise, and therefore assessments of ethos are the prima facie tool for managing the otherwise overwhelming and often uncontextualized flow of information made possible by the Internet” (3). At best, ethos is here the expert’s meta-information; and a site like Reddit, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher argue, provides cues that allow fast processing of this meta-information such that expertise may be cogently accessed.

This approach reinforces what I submit are untenable distinctions between expertise as substantive competence or knowledge and ethos as the individually attributed state of being believable. In the case of Moriarty and Mehlenbacher, such attribution is associated with the architectural affordances of flair, karma scores, and redditors’ “up/down voting.” In the distinction, knowing is separable from the knower, and the knower in turn is separable from the various social networks of which her subjectivity as expert is in fact an effect. The authors’ decision to use the word “ethotic” is to an extent understandable—the Greek is awkwardly translated in cognate English words. But “ethotic,” which disavows the connection to “ethical,” ignores the polysemy of ethos and ethics. And this clearly has implications for expertise, which depends on rhetorical negotiations of both. My invitation for scholars who study ethos and expertise in digital environments is to consider the productivity and invention of expertising (as opposed to expertise), and ethos as the contiguity of being in a network, virtual or otherwise.

Moriarty and Mehlenbacher model a productive balance between a critical perspective and what might be characterized as “uncynicism.” They seem genuinely hopeful that engagements between scientists and lay-publics serve important functions, particularly when the engagements happen in an idiom that publics are comfortable with. There is, in other words, a sense in this essay that civically minded scientists who choose to talk to everyday people can accomplish good things. Moreover, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher do not crinkle their academic noses at Reddit as a forum for public discourse. Taking Reddit seriously, they are instructively offering nuance to the assumption that popular spaces are incorrigibly anti-education.

Having said this, I submit that the most important insights about Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s findings emerge when their case study is framed by comparative questions. For example, do the architectural affordances identified in the essay work the same way for other experts as for scientists? This question could move the investigation from the r/science subreddit to others, potentially even to subreddits with no obvious connection to expertise. Relatedly, if the answer is no, Moriarty and Mehlenbacher might have come upon
a rhetorical feature of online science communication. This possibility raises an empirical question: Is it a fact that “we increasingly see scientists taking to the web to share their research or advocate for science” (1)? Is this in comparison to how often scientists previously shared their research publicly, or in comparison to how scientific discussions online previously might be generated among non-scientists? Further, if the answer is yes—the architectural affordances that Moriarty and Mehlenbacher identify do work the same way for other experts as for scientists—the affordances may be traceable to something other than “how a single scientist might craft their credibility online” (1). Again relatedly, to what degree is everyone’s ethos presently a function of “aggregate information” (2) that pools at our individual network nodes? Put differently, how are the architectural features that Moriarty and Mehlenbacher examine tantamount to intersubjective articulation in social media writ large?

**Rhetoric and Caring**

As I note the acronemic play in AMA—Reddit’s “Ask Me Anything” series compared to what is more familiar in science contexts, the American Medical Association—I think of a dialectic that has long puzzled me about the rhetoric of expertise. On one hand, experts are more rhetorically effective the more they can convince others that they have the public’s best interest in mind. This is what Moriarty and Mehlenbacher approach via ethos, specifically eunoia. Eunoia is an experience and faculty or state of mind wherein the goodness of one is evident to and connects to the goodness of others; Aristotle locates it within ethos, and it is usually translated as goodwill.

There is some confusion in Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s translations between eunoia and arete, another facet of ethos typically translated as virtue or excellence, even perfection (8). Experts must demonstrate through persuasion that they care. Or, possibly, through persuasion, care is cultivated. In the case of s/reddit, the host generously offers to answer any question, bringing his/her extensive knowledge to even the humblest. On the other hand, scientific discourse is fundamentally contingent on the ideal of neutrality or objectivity, a detachment between the scientist and the object of analysis. The scientist must not care, according to a long tradition of requisite objectivity. How, I wonder, does the rhetoric of expertise in virtual spaces negotiate the tension between care and not-care, or goodwill and objectivity? Regardless of whether one takes a cynical approach to public scientists’ goodwill, or a skeptical approach to the impossibility of objectivity, the rhetorical practices of s/reddit depend on both constructs, even if the former is more prominent than the latter.

Moriarty and Mehlenbacher’s essay is a compelling illustration of social epistemology in the context of digital networks. Specifically, their attention to a content-focused site that depends profoundly on participant activity reveals how scientific discourses intervene in popular culture, and how popular culture responds to scientific discourses with short-cuts for access.
References