
Writer's Statement about “Looking Through the Semiotic Lens: Rhetorical Sponsors of Civic Engagement in Cyberpublics”

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The experience of writing a research paper in ENC 1102 with Professor Launier set a strong academic foundation for me to build upon in my time as a UCF student. Prior to transferring to UCF from Valencia College in the spring of 2015, I had never taken a college-level composition course. I was surprised when some of my credits didn't transfer and I found out I had to take ENC 1102. Under the guidance of Professor Launier, I was able to accomplish a project that felt impossible at the start of the semester. Ultimately, having the opportunity to craft a research paper in my first semester at UCF has enriched my academic experience, making me a stronger writer and more capable student in the process. Part of our classwork involved keeping a daily work log to better manage our time. It was a struggle to develop the habit, but the growing pains were worth it for the positive impact logging my time had on my overall research process. I've taken this skillset with me and applied it to my studies beyond ENC 1102.

At my core I am a lover of learning, so it can be difficult to reign in my focus on one particular interest of study at any given time. I find myself in the Writing and Rhetoric program because I'm fascinated by language's ability to forge connections across cultural and ideological boundaries. The initial prospect of tackling a research project with so few constraints felt daunting. With Professor Launier's help, I was able to pinpoint a general focus that was realistic for the purpose of the assignment and time restrictions of our class. As a hobbyist photographer, I am drawn to the function of visual rhetoric in conveying meaning and its ability to elicit a response from its audience.

For a few years I've followed the work of a particular photo project online—*Humans of New York (HONY)*—that has become very popular. I admired the way photographer Brandon Stanton welded written and visual texts together to embody the stories of his subjects, and how he used social media as a free resource to share these stories with a broad audience. *HONY* has evolved into more than a photo project; it is a tool for making cross-cultural connections across social and geographical divides on a global level. When I encountered the story of Vidal, a student at Mott Hall Bridges Academy in Brooklyn, it was the first time I truly appreciated *HONY*'s potential as a medium for initiating real, tangible change. Stanton was able to raise over \$1 million in funds through online crowd funding to donate directly to school administrators.

As a product of the last generation to remember a time before the integration of online interaction into our daily lives, I feel like a link between two polar Internet ideologies—one that values its positive impacts, and one that focuses on its detriments. I've observed a widely expressed

opinion that “online activism” in any form is nothing more than convenient “slacktivism”—that social media offers a guise for the appearance of engagement without requiring any actual involvement in a cause from supporters. *HONY*'s story on Vidal and his school offered me a unique case study to examine how online engagement can be transitioned to offline support.

In the process of doing research I came across an example of online media that made me look the role of Internet-based multimodal rhetorics in civic engagement through a different lens. The journal *Vectors* published an original interactive site operating to inform its audience of the reality of Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans through an all-encompassing user driven experience. The use of visual rhetoric in the form of maps, images, and graphs—combined with written text and audio—brings to life the historical and social context that allowed such a catastrophic event to occur, whose devastation was compounded by an abysmal response to the emergency. The functionality of the site was designed to be impactful. Users are able to contextualize Hurricane Katrina in a way they couldn't before. When I proposed the idea of juxtaposing its rhetorical effects to that of *HONY*'s posts on Vidal, Professor Launier encouraged my decision and helped me to shift the framework I'd established around my research topic.

Comparing alternative modes of online civic engagement allowed me to fully appreciate the power of discourse in multimodal rhetorics and their capacity for making meaningful change. It was my goal for this research to serve as a model for others who are also fascinated by the rhetorical potential of online spaces for engaging, and activating, a new generation of users and potential activists. I hope that in the future my findings can aid others in discovering the most effective methods for promoting social engagement.