

## The Desktop Doctor: Medical Rhetoric in the Emergent Online Context

Rhetoric is the use of language to achieve certain goals, and genres are the tools which, through years of in-community design, can most effectively bring about those goals. Medicine, like any rhetorical community, is no different. For decades, medical professionals have used genres such as patient interviews, medical textbooks, and research articles to manage information and ensure that patients receive the best care possible. In recent years, however, the increasingly common usage of the Internet has created a new source of easily accessible medical information. Rhetoric researchers and other scholars have focused most of their attention thus far on the individuals who use these sources of online medical information. There has been much less academic discourse on the design of the recently emerged online genres that facilitate this access.

I plan to investigate how these genres have been constructed to function as the interface between interested individuals and an enormous collection of medical data. I will put forward the argument that online medical resources, if designed effectively and fully incorporating leadership from the medical professional sphere, have the potential to provide patients with unprecedented access to relevant medical information. I will argue for the positive potential inherent in these online developments, if they are guided by professionals with an awareness of both medical and rhetorical principles.

To carry out this research, I will conduct both a content analysis, as described by Thomas Huckin, and a survey. I will analyze websites which function as major providers of online

medical resources. By far the largest of these is the service WebMD, which will therefore be first and foremost in my analysis. Of course, it would be misleading to rely upon a single provider, however large it is, for research findings. For that reason, I will also analyze the online medical resources provided by the websites of the Mayo Clinic, the U.S. Center for Disease Control, and the service MedicineNet. These sites will be examined both as single, coherent genre sets and as collections of separate yet interrelated genres. Each provider, with its unique context yet overall highly similar design, provides an example of how broadly used genres can be slightly adjusted for different settings.

Accompanying this content analysis is a ten-question survey. I am using the online service Survey Monkey for assistance in designing this survey and as a channel for its presentation to respondents. The questions, which I am including at the end of this proposal, address respondents' usage of online medical resources, emphasizing the results of this usage and the specific genres on these sites that respondents use. Additionally, there is a question asking the respondents' age, allowing me to screen out minors, in accordance with accepted human research ethics. I will be able to use Survey Monkey to collect respondent answers. I will then compare my findings from content analysis with the survey data. By synthesizing my analysis of the relevant genres with data from respondents' answers, I will be able to explain how these genres are functioning in practice. I hope to identify the most commonly used features of the websites in question, and analyze relevant genres to determine why some genres are more effective, and therefore more popular, than others.

The following is the estimated schedule for this research project:

- Week of March 21: Analysis of relevant websites, pointing to key genres within them and the differences and similarities among them

- March 21: Approval of survey questions by Dr. Galbreath
- March 22: Design of survey, through Survey Monkey, completed; production of Research Plan
- March 23: Submission of Research Plan; uploading of survey on Survey Monkey
- Week of March 28: Analyze survey data; continue to analyze websites, now in light of survey responses
- April 1: Begin drafting Researched Argument
- April 6: Present Researched Argument draft for Workshop
- April 8: Complete Researched Argument



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## Survey Questions

What is your current age?

- 18 or under
- 19 – 25
- 26 – 35
- 36 – 45
- 46 – 55
- 56 – 65
- 66 or over

How often do you use online services such as WebMD to access medical information?

- Daily
- Every 2 – 4 days
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Rarely
- Never

Have you ever used online medical resources in deciding whether to pursue medical treatments?

- Yes
- No

Which, if any, of the following common online services have you used?

- Symptom checker
- Periodic email newsletter
- Physician directory
- Pill identifier

For which of the following reasons, if any, do you use online medical resources?

- Researching medical issues affecting myself
- Researching medical issues affecting a family member or friend
- Researching medication for myself
- Researching medication for a family member or friend
- Curiosity concerning recent diseases and/or health developments
- Nutrition, fitness, and/or other lifestyle issues
- Other (please specify):

Have you ever bought an over-the-counter medication due, in whole or in part, to an advertisement seen on a site offering medical resources?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever asked your physician about a prescription medication due, in whole or in part, to an advertisement seen on a site offering medical resources?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever used online medical resources to help carry out any of the following activities?

- Exercise
- Dieting
- Healthy cooking
- Meditation
- Cosmetics

When accessing online medical resources, do you primarily obtain information from written articles, video clips, or both equally?

- Articles
- Video clips
- Both equally

Have you ever submitted any of the following to online medical resource sites?

- User review of prescription medication
- User review of over-the-counter medication or supplement
- User review of local physician
- Message board post



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