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## PAPERS

- The Value of the Technical Communicator's Role in the Development of Information Systems..... *J. Fisher* 145  
Guidelines for Communication and Engineering Problem Solving at the Basic Level..... *M. A. Bridgwood* 156  
The Organization of Japanese Expository Passages..... *W. Fukuoka and J. H. Spyridakis* 166

---

## INTERFACE

- Web Sites for the Language-Impaired..... *M. Durham* 175  
A Memorandum Conundrum..... *M. Macari* 178

---

## PROFILES

- Thom Haller..... *C. Brammer* 181  
Charles D. Haynes..... *N. Ervin* 185

---

## BOOK REVIEWS

- JoAnn T. Hackos and Janice C. Redish, *User and Task Analysis for Interface Design*..... *Reviewed by M. Strosnider* 188  
Jean A. Lutz and C. Gilbert Storms, *The Practice of Technical and Scientific Communication: Writing in Professional Contexts*..... *Reviewed by L. Beason* 190  
Jo Allen, *Writing in the Workplace*..... *Reviewed by C. Brammer* 193  
Elaine Weiss, *The Accidental Trainer: You Know Computers, So They Want You to Teach Everyone Else*..... *Reviewed by J. D. Jenson* 196  
Teresa C. Kynell and Wendy Krieg Stone, *Critical Thinking and Writing*..... *Reviewed by K. Bishop* 198  
Tharon W. Howard, *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities*..... *Reviewed by A. C. Kinme Hea* 200

---

## SPECIAL ISSUE ANNOUNCEMENTS

- New Perspectives on Document Evaluation Methods..... 203  
Communication as a Social Construct Within an Information Society..... 204  
Technical Innovations and Global Business Communication..... 205

---

## CALL FOR PAPERS

- IEEE *Potentials* Magazine..... 206
-

Tharon W. Howard

*A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities*

Book Review

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**Index Terms**— *Electronic communities, electronic writing, print and electronic media.*

In *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities*, Tharon W. Howard takes on the arduous task of outlining definitions of community as they relate to the rhetorical practices of participants writing on wide-area networks (WANs). Howard's exploration is complex not only in its scope, an inquiry into interdisciplinary definitions and constructions of community, but also in its approach, a Janustian view of the issues of community as they relate to participation in WANs. Speaking to an audience of professional writing instructors and scholars, Howard provides practical and theoretical discussions concerning the intersections of media and community. The goal of such considerations, as he explains, is to understand better how conceptions of community both inform and are informed by our ideas about writing for computer networks (pp. 9–10). To trace a pathway to this goal for readers, Howard's early chapters provide extensive definitions of terms and histories of network technologies. His later chapters present a detailed analysis of the online discussion group PURTOPOL, and thus offer a direct path toward his goal of elucidating the relationship between community and writing in online spaces.

In chapter one, Howard provides a critical imperative for professional writing instructors and scholars working in networked writing environments. That is, by viewing

electronic writing in more complex ways rather than as merely a vehicle for transmitting information, we as writing instructors and scholars will be able to examine and respond to—rather than merely react to—the promises and perils of teaching and learning in networked spaces. As an instructor committed to self-reflective, critical teaching practices, I appreciate Howard's call for more critical engagements with technology. He rightly presumes that technologies, in this case media technologies, are situated in a set of social contexts and that those contexts must be explored and understood in order to achieve a more balanced approach to both teaching and researching.

In chapters two and three, Howard provides extensive histories of print and electronic media. Using specific examples from current global events as well as historical configurations of media, Howard asserts the importance of WANs in both shaping those events and recasting our perceptions of print-based media. These interrelationships of media, however, are not presented as simple translations or projections of traditional print-based media into the new forms of networked texts. Instead, Howard presents a complex discussion of the ways in which print and electronic media interact, change, and shift depending upon historical and social factors, and in turn, how historical and social factors shape the ways in which

media function in our daily lives. Chapter three extends this discussion of media relationships to issues of electronic publishing. By considering several views of electronic publishing—of how e-texts should shape what is written, who writes, and how writing is interpreted—Howard reveals the potentials and constraints of each view. These chapters engage readers in Howard's own process. Rather than simply directing the readers to his own conclusions, Howard painstakingly develops definitional and historical discussions that allow readers to join him in the process of considering recent debates on electronic writing and publishing and its potentials for our scholarship and teaching.

In chapters four and five, Howard moves from the contested nature of definitions and histories of electronic writing to those of community. Chapter four seeks a more complex view of community beyond traditional, print-based definitions that merely highlight spatiality as evidence of community. Using Sandel's typology of community as a starting point, Howard defines both constitutive and individualistic concepts of community. In the constitutive community, members are bound together not simply by what they have as fellow citizens but by who they are as subjects. In the individualistic community, members are bound together by the desire for the positive effects of membership within the group.

Chapter five addresses the problematic of the constitutive-individualistic binary: utopian and pragmatic determinisms. Because each pole can lead to a form of determinism, Howard suggests that instructors and researchers in the networked classroom must learn to negotiate the continuum that this binary offers them. At one end of the pole, Howard questions the utopian ideal of the constitutive community, which asserts that the subject can critique and eventually choose among competing

ideological positions within a community. At the other end of the pole, Howard argues against the pragmatic ideal of the individualistic community, which suggests that the subject is unable to make any choices at all in relation to the accepted practices within a community. On the one hand, the subject can transcend the material and social conditions of a community through ideological critique, and on the other hand, the subject must participate in the conventions of the community or else be denied membership in it. Howard argues that networked writing instructors and scholars must exchange such an antagonistic framework of community for one that will allow for the adjudication of competing knowledge claims. He posits that by applying the tension inherent within this binary of community to our experiences with networked writing, we can defamiliarize, and thus examine more carefully, many of the writing and reading practices that we otherwise take for granted when working with more traditional media.

Chapters six and seven bring together Howard's discussions of electronic writing and publishing and the binary of community, as he draws upon his own experiences hosting the electronic discussion group PURTOPOI. Originally intended to provide faculty, staff, and graduate students in Purdue University's English Department with a "common" space for interaction, PURTOPOI later evolved to include rhetoric and composition scholars and educators as well as professional communicators. In a detailed analysis of the group, Howard articulates how his own definitions and histories of media, technology, writing, and community all bear upon its relationships and evolution. Chapter six explores the question of whether or not electronic discussion groups can be considered communities. Howard concludes that PURTOPOI can be conceived

of as a forum, a trace of a discourse community rather than a community itself. For Howard, forums like PURTOPOI allow for contesting claims and the working out of complex relationships without slipping into the determinisms provided by the conceptions of community outlined earlier in his work. Examples include the group's struggle to determine not only **what** topics should be discussed but also **how** posts on particular topics should be addressed and even formatted by participants. Instead of attempting to unify members within the confines of constitutive or individualistic definitions of community, forums allow for exchange and renegotiation among members. Chapter seven extends the implications of his assertion for instructors and scholars working in networked writing environments, particularly in electronic discussion forums. Rather than assuming that electronic forums are inherently liberating and valuable to all participants equally, Howard suggests that we look for ways in which definitions of community can enable us to gain at least momentary points of connection with others—our students and our colleagues.

Following Howard down the path of exploring issues that impinge upon teaching and researching professional writing, I appreciate his care in offering a complex view of networked writing and how it both affects and is affected by our conceptions of community. This care is further evidenced by his inclusion of an appendix of network terminology. Overall, this text makes apparent both the author's process and his assessments of the possible critical connections among networked writing and conceptions of community. For professional writing instructors interested in the ways in which discussion lists, chat spaces, and other online discussion groups function in relationship to peer collaboration and classroom community, Howard's

book outlines and elucidates both the theoretical underpinnings and practical analyses of many current claims about electronic writing

spaces. For professional writing scholars pursuing connections among electronic writing spaces and community, Howard's text

challenges many of our notions about media, technology, and subjectivity.

#### BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR REVIEW

The following books are available for review in IEEE TRANSACTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION. If you are interested in reviewing one of them in 1000–1500 words, please contact the book review editor. If you would like to suggest another book for review, contact the book review editor with a title and a brief description.

Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu, *The Business Writer's Companion*, 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

Battalio, *The Rhetoric of Science in the Evolution of American Ornithological Discourse*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1998.

Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare, *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999.

Eckhouse, *Competitive Communication: A Rhetoric for Modern Business*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999.

Porter, *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1998.

Riordan and Pauley, *Technical Report Writing Today*, 7th ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Vicente, *Cognitive Work Analysis: Toward Safe, Productive, and Healthy Computer-Based Work*. Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999.