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## Critical Literacy in a Digital Era: Technology, Rhetoric and the Public Interest

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[Warnick, Barbara](#)  
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*In Critical Literacy in a Digital Era*, Barbara Warnick addresses the emergence of the rhetoric of technology that has surrounded the Internet since its inception several decades ago, and explores the ways in which that discourse advances public interest or denies it. She marks the beginning of the 'talk about technology' in several ways, addressing three particular and distinct aspects of the discussion that have made considerable impact on the way technology is approached, perceived, and used in America.

Warnick's analysis is approached with critical flair and tenacious, intellectual verve. She squares off against the assumed and unquestioned conclusions that are becoming accepted as societal norms, and looks critically at the communication behavior that has fostered this shift in cultural mindset. Her close, in-context review of discursive communication strategies in three sectors of technology discourse helps assess the effectiveness and credibility of the persuasive measures used to influence the public about the Internet. Through this decidedly rhetorical critical approach she decries the way in which the study of technology

communication has been largely limited to research advanced by social scientists, or not advanced at all.

To examine the issue, Warnick first uses WIRED magazine as her object of study. In section one she reviews its early years of publication and uncovers the tacitly ideological way in which technological advancement is addressed. “Luddites, women, minorities, and other groups who do not make up WIRED’s readership” are clearly marginalized and devalued by their obvious absences” (43). Warnick points out the many methods WIRED uses to deliver what she sees as a one-sided message about the progressive and expansive use of technology in society. She reveals signs of technological hierarchy peppered throughout the magazine’s pages in many examples, one of which is the oft-referenced “Digital Citizen.” Here she notes the obvious capitalization of the moniker. In other instances she points out the numerous images of the “young entrepreneur,” all of which are laudatory in nature. The overly positive references to the technologically savvy are bothersome to Warnick’s notion of open, unfettered discourse, particularly because of WIRED’s hearty subscription base that reaches at least one-half million readers each month. Because its potential to influence society is so great, the author feels the publication must broaden its discussion and be open to dissenting voices. Another example she notes is the magazine’s practice of habitually celebrating technological expertise, innovation and new products. This, she explains, is reflected in its editorial choices and clear writing formulae. Warnick notes that, flaunting an embellished style and epideictic approach, WIRED stories generally underscore a foregone conclusion of technology as panacea for all societal ills.

When examining several issues of the magazine from more recent years Warnick notes slight changes in editorial direction. Since the year 2000 she found a somewhat more open editorial stance, particularly with the publication of a stout warning from Bill Joy on the instability of the future. The highly credible article, written by one of software’s most notable programmer/developers appeared in WIRED’s 8.04 issue and warned readers of a robotic species that will compete with the human species. Although placement of the article helps to position WIRED as a more credible source of information about technology, ultimately, however, Warnick posits the need for a deliberative approach, calling for a counternarrative to the hype and spin of overzealous techno-ideologues, as well as away from the dire predictions and negativity emanating from the old media enthusiasts.

In the next section of her book Warnick examines the invitational discourse surrounding the way women were welcomed onto the Internet, and looks at early gender inequity as it existed until approximately 1997. After that time, she attributes the rapid rise in female usage of the Internet to the marketers tapping into “woman as consumer.” Appeals toward this end came from print media, early cybergrrl discourse that existed on the web, and ezine content, each helping to coax

women onto the virtual landscape, creating a space that was user-friendly to females.

The final section of the succinct volume explores the expansion of political parody sites as a persuasive strategy in the United States presidential elections of 1996 and 2000. Warnick wonders, are the political parody sites truly “discourse communities” that interact and learn to live together in the midst of shared space, or are they, “more an enclave of like-minded exchangers deriving pleasure from their positions as being “in the know” about candidates past gaffes and misstatements? (119)”

Through each of these examples Warnick establishes the need for a new narrative. She recommends meaningful deliberation about new media policy, and calls for a discourse that lends itself toward more open discussion, one that is not laden with preconceived and overly optimistic ideals, but one that will work toward truest interest of the public. The book is an enjoyable read, one that is worthy of careful consideration and potentially useful as a sturdy springboard for intelligent discussion.

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