ARGUMENTS FOR EVERYBODY

Social Media, Context Collapse, and the Universal Audience

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In the past, it took a major life event to gather all the people in one’s life. At a wedding, for example, the stress of putting one’s parents, colleagues, acquaintances, old friends, and many other audiences together might be offset, at least, by the one-time nature of the event. But if you’re a user of social media, such experiences have become routine — for better or worse, you now live in a perpetual wedding (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). The most popular social networking platforms, like Facebook, collapse boundaries between formerly discrete audiences with greater force than at any time in human history. This project takes up the challenges and opportunities that these collapsed boundaries present for the study and practice of argument. Arguments matter on social media. The Pew Research Internet Project recently found that

social media [are] increasingly home to civil society, the place where knowledge sharing, public discussions, debates, and disputes are carried out. As the new public square, social media conversations are as important to document as any other large public gathering.

(Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Himelboim, 2014, “Why Is It Useful,” para. 1)

Argument scholars are revealing that these new “networked public sphere[s]” (Pfister, 2014, p. 49) — and especially their interactivity, instantaneity, scale, and archiving and search capacities (Pfister, 2010) — are changing how people argue.

Although social media have provided citizens with positive opportunities for debate and discussion, some recent research finds that social media users are less likely than nonusers to debate in both online and offline spaces: “If people thought their friends and followers in social media disagreed with them, they were less likely to say they would state their views” (Hampton et al., 2014, para. 6). Emerging evidence suggests that the ways in which users imagine and react to the multiple, disparate audiences on their networks relate to their very willingness to argue.

I come to this study with two concepts in mind. The first is how argumentation is impacted by the context collapse of social media, defined as “the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients” (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). Thinking about context collapse led me to a related concept in argumentation studies: Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) universal audience, or “the whole of mankind [sic], or at least, of all normal, adult persons,” which conveys the idea that
Arguments for Everybody

"for each speaker at each moment, there exists an audience transcending all others, which cannot be easily forced within the bounds of a particular audience" (p. 30).

Scholars have critiqued the universal audience for being, among other issues, ethereal and impractical, but I argue that context collapse on social media now provides the universal audience with more empirical grounding and enhances its usefulness in the study and practice of argument. In what follows, I explore the theoretical foundations of the universal audience and context collapse and then, by synthesizing these concepts, generate three propositions about arguments addressed to digital audiences.

The Universal Audience

Perelman (1982) distinguished between particular audiences and a universal audience that “may be all of humanity, or at least all those who are competent and reasonable . . . which may itself be made up of an infinite variety of particular audiences” (p. 14). Arguers can distinguish between claims made to specific audiences and appeals to representative premises or “reason,” a difference between appeals to “some or . . . every reasonable being” (p. 18).

Why make this distinction? In part, Perelman (1982) deployed the universal audience as a way between “the rhetorician’s goal of adherence” and “the philosopher’s goal of truth” (p. 32), or between efficacy and validity, because “the efficacy of an argument is relative to the audience” but “validity is relative to a competent audience, most often to the universal audience” (p. 140). In other words, the universal audience imbues rhetoric with transcendent or ethical aspirations while providing philosophy with a sense that limited persuasive appeals still matter. Yet, as Arnold underscores, to appeal to a universal audience is still “the highest and most demanding choice open to arguers” (as quoted in Perelman, 1982, p. xix).

Between rhetoric and philosophy, a paradox follows: The universal audience is both context-dependent and context-independent. The universal audience heralds a “universal and unambiguously imagined [emphasis added] by the speaker” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 31). Invocations of a universal audience start with human beings, not outside of them. But this starting point should not obscure how projections come to have real consequences for speakers and audiences. For example, the universal audience contains elements of Kant’s categorial imperative and Rousseau’s general will (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Ray, 1978). Where others theorize “unwarranted generalization[s] of an individual intuition,” however, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) applied a social constructionist perspective, arguing that “each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience,” or of what is “real, true, and objectively valid” (p. 33; see also de Velasco, 2005).

In this sense, the universal audience can be formed through contingent interaction between speaker and audience: “Audiences are not independent of one another. . . . particular concrete audiences are capable of validating a concept of the universal audience which characterizes them” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 35). Jørgensen (2009) noted that, in The New Rhetoric (TNR), the universal audience is “intersubjective” rather than “subjective” (p. 13). Crosswhite (1993) observed that “universal is itself a matter of degree, and what will count as a universal audience is determined by the particular rhetorical situation” (p. 388).

In practice, arguers tend to move between appeals to specific audiences and the higher level of the universal audience. Even in dialogue between two interlocutors, others become “floating incarnations of this universal audience” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 31). Flashes of the universal audience also appear in the multiple audiences in a parliamentary assembly because arguers must group people into a whole entity when speaking.
Recovering Argument

That said, scholarly reaction to the universal audience has been mixed. Arthos (2004) captured this ambivalence, calling the concept "compelling, baffling, logical, contradictory, expansive, elliptical, revelatory, and opaque" (p. 31). Some have complained that the concept is too philosophical. Jørgensen (2009) objected that, despite its intersubjective features, the concept is "far from empirical in the descriptive sense of observing persuasive effects. Real audiences remain, so to speak, inaccessible to [the] theory" (p. 13). On the other hand, de Velasco (2005) argued that the concept holds promise for political, rhetorical ways of thinking about a "privileged addressee" (p. 47) that represents "partial and partisan claims about the real" (p. 61) made transcendent and timeless.

The scope of the universal audience also has been subject to varying interpretations. Gouse (1999) argued that "discourse that emphasizes, that thematicizes values, can never address a universal audience because particular values can never be plausibly asserted as binding on all human beings in all circumstances" (p. 207); hence, the universal audience "thematizes facts and truths" (p. 210). Casting a wider net, Alkyn (2008) called the universal audience an "agglomerative notion that functions as a criterion for how widely an argument may be given credence" (p. 239) on two levels: "Pragmatically, it is an abstraction of potential human agreement, and epistemically, it is a rational ideal" (p. 248). More simply, such conceptions illuminate TNR's goal of positioning rhetoric between the real and ideal (Fenheimer, 2009).

Scholars' diverse reactions to the universal audience focus on many of TNR's binaries between rhetoric and philosophy, efficacy and validity, values and facts, empirical and abstract, pragmatic and epistemic, real and ideal, and particular and universal. Just as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca found productive ground for argumentation by working between these polarities, I contend that the tensions of context collapse in social media can advance understandings of the universal audience.

Context Collapse

Context collapse highlights the shortcomings of thinking only about particular audiences in a social media age. Marwick and Boyd (2014) noted that in context collapse varied audiences are made to coexist, but that "it is challenging to manage discrete social worlds simultaneously, particularly when the norms and values of these worlds differ" (p. 1056). Reminiscent of the universal audience, Marwick and Boyd (2010) even called such projections the "imagined audience" (p. 114).

Although sites like Facebook offer tools with which to segment one's audiences — such as privacy settings — their architecture generally makes it difficult to do so. Defriending others is "socially costly" (Marwick & Boyd, 2014, p. 1057), and creating particular audiences out of one's friends requires the time-consuming and cognitively demanding tasks of constructing audience bins and then assigning profiles, one at a time. In essence, on social networking sites "context collapse makes it more difficult for individuals to vary self-presentation by audience" (Vittachi, 2012, p. 465). Consequently, users are pressured to consider how and what their messages may mean to a more universal audience.

TNR makes the universal audience normative, but theories of context collapse on social media suggest that flattened audiences have both positive and negative impacts. Davis and Jürgensen (2014) distinguished between "context collisions," which are "intentional," and more stressful "context collisions," which are "unintentional" (p. 476). They recognized that overlapping identities and networks are present to some extent in most contexts, but social media blur social boundaries more than do many offline settings: "Collapsing contexts challenge clean movement between networks and across Generalized Others. Indeed, the default within social media platforms is such that diverse Generalized Others converge into a single mass" (p. 478). A long line...
of thought extending from Mead’s (1934/1962) generalized other to Goffman’s (1959) account of role-playing is suggestive in explaining how audiences coexist in tense online spaces that resist segmentation.

It is common lore in marketing that, when it comes to reaching audiences, “One Size Never Fits All” (Lee & Kotler, 2011, p. 129). However, the forms of participation in social media run against this wisdom. Even the mantra of adapting to one’s audience – central to decades of communication pedagogy – becomes suspect under conditions of collapsing social boundaries. Without segmentation, adaptive communication most comports with the features of universal rather than particular audiences. At the same time, social media messages extend beyond an individual’s control, as others may post on a person’s timeline or tag the person in a photo in a way that affects online and offline identity development (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009).

The literature on context collapse has focused mostly on identity and psychosocial phenomena in social media. A next step is to consider how context collapse impacts argumentation and deliberation online. Vinak (2012), for instance, asked: “Do users apply a lowest common denominator approach, only making disclosures that are appropriate for all audience members?” (p. 451). It is easy to send content across one’s network, but difficulties can ensue if posts remain relevant only to a small selection of one’s friends (p. 455). Some find that greater audience size and diversity actually increase one’s messages (p. 465). Others, however, find that participants censor themselves because “context collapse creates an audience that is often imagined as its most sensitive members: parents, partners, and bosses” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 125). In either case, the universal audience and context collapse clearly have much to do with one another. In the next section, I posit three emergent propositions.

**Synthesis**

In sum, context collapse in social media makes the universal audience far more relevant to argumentation in the Web 2.0 era. I propose three ways in which this development invites scholars and practitioners to think through arguments in a digital age.

First, the vast digital footprints within social media platforms make universal audits amenable to empirical investigation. Within and between comment threads on Facebook, tweeting and retweeting on Twitter, or projections to all potential employers on LinkedIn, researchers can trace a person’s or group’s representation of a universal audience. Perhaps the very ground on which argument as a process breaks down in social media has to do with inadvertent or inadvertent projections to particular or universal audiences. For example, if an argument against gun control is adapted well to a small portion of one’s Facebook friends, it may be equally poorly adapted to the many other friends who may see the posting unintentionally. Social media spaces can be mined for evidence of the ways in which these projections occur. Even the number of “likes” that an argument generates on Facebook might be seen as evidence that a universal audience has been constructed out of many disparate ones.

Second, the structure of major social media platforms fosters argument and advocacy with the universal audience. The default settings for two of the biggest social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, are anything but neutral in this regard, urging users to add and broadcast their messages to as many friends as possible. Relatedly, one failed social media effort, Google Circles, encouraged users to draw circles around particular audiences, a task many found too difficult to accomplish (see Na, 2011).

Some may object that social media more comprise a large reference group than all reasonable humanity. But TNR’s description of the universal audience as the imagined projection of speakers...
embedded in cultural contexts still approximates the situation presented by social networking sites, especially on a site like Twitter, which encourages following and being followed by complete strangers. Moreover, to conjure up a universal audience to which an argument can apply, arguers' message strategies surely rely a great deal on a sense of all the people they know in their own lives. That arguments can be shared or hyperlinked only shifts social media audiences further in the universal direction.

Third, the fragmentation, speed, and collective pressures of social media all likely bear on the extent to which users construct the universal audience. Perhaps the disjointed, quick, and affective features of contemporary online argumentation (Harsin, 2014) make people project the universal audience less thoughtfully than TNR envisions. Corresponding with the “invention of novel arguments” (Pfister, 2011, p. 152) amid such “speed, agonism, and copiousness” (p. 153), arguers’ very imaginations about audiences could be even more creative than in offline interactions. And groups acting in concert against elements or sequences of argumentation online (Lewinski, 2010) may show that arguments on social media are more about clashing visions of universal audiences than about particular ones.

Overall, context collapse and appeals to the universal audience beg further inquiry. Argumentation scholars should move this conversation forward by theorizing how arguments addressed to everyone affect reasoning and reasonability in an evolving digital age.

References


Arguments for Everybody


RECOVERING ARGUMENT

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