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Eloquentia Perfecta and the New Media Landscape

By Diana Owen

The ability to judiciously apply *eloquentia perfecta* to new situations has been a hallmark of Jesuit education. Steven Mailloux of Loyola Marymount University stated in an address at Fordham University that “... rhetoric is going to be embedded in the media of the day.”

Consistent with the aims of *eloquentia perfecta*, he argued, the digital revolution can be used to promote the greater good. Students can be provided with the intellectual tools to engage responsibly and eloquently in the digital realm.

The complexity and cultural underpinnings of the current media landscape present challenges for Jesuit colleges and universities seeking to adapt the tenets of *eloquentia perfecta* to the modern-day curriculum. Students are bombarded with information from a constantly evolving array of platforms that require increasingly specialized skill sets to navigate successfully. The questionable quality and vitriolic tone of much of the content disseminated via media run in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of *eloquentia perfecta*. A tradition of well-reasoned, carefully articulated arguments is more difficult to achieve in a media environment that encourages an abundance of information expressed in brief. In these times, rhetorical training that emphasizes substance, civility, and responsibility is vital.

The New Media Landscape

The American media environment has been undergoing a significant transformation since the 1980s. Broadcast media which disseminate information of general societal interest to large geographically dispersed audiences have been joined by platforms that narrowcast content to specific individuals. The media landscape now consists of a complex, multi-tiered system that accommodates traditional mass media, novel digital media, and hybrid forms incorporating elements of old and new media. Traditional forms of entertainment programming, like television and radio talk shows, have gotten into the news business. New technologies have given rise to a vast array of media options, like blogs, social networking sites, and video sharing sites. Established media are adapting to the shifting environment, as traditional for-

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Gonzaga University.

Photo by Rajah Bose.

mats incorporate current innovations. The websites of mainstream media organizations have become multi-media resources that feature content produced by professionals as well as citizens.

Well-established broadcast channels continue to form the backbone of media system. The majority of people still rely heavily on television for news, entertainment, and sports even as new media formats, and the devices for accessing them—cell phones, tablets, net-books—proliferate. A 2012 Pew Research Center study indicates that over 70 percent of the public gets most of its information from television news programs. Further evidence of television's popularity in the new media age is found in a Pew report indicating that 73 percent of the public watched the 2012 Olympics on television, compared to 17 percent who followed the games online and 12 percent who tracked the action via social media.

Traditional print media have fallen on difficult times, as their budgets have been slashed, staffs have been cut, and investigative journalism has fallen by the wayside. Print newspapers have witnessed a significant decline in readership over the past two decades, but maintain a dedicated following of 31 percent of the population. A 2012 Rasmussen Report finds that only 28 percent of readers prefer the online to the print version of their favorite newspaper.

The new media first emerged in the 1980s when traditional entertainment media became deliberately involved in the distribution of news. Radio and television talk programs, comedy shows, tabloid newspapers, celebrity magazines, and music television increasingly disseminated content related to legal issues, election campaigns, public policy, and societal events.

Presidential candidates seeking to gain more favorable coverage than they were getting from the mainstream press courted entertainment media. Candidates now gain more publicity by appearing on the front cover of *People Weekly* magazine than through stories in *Time* or *Newsweek*. They routinely make the rounds of television talk shows, like *Ellen* and *The View*, where they face mostly supportive audiences. This type of new media/old technology has resulted in the rise of infotainment, an obsession with gossip and scandal, and the degradation of news standards. At the same time, it has made news more accessible and palatable to more people.

The second phase in new media's evolution is inspired by technology. The arrival of the Internet and the World Wide Web enabled the creation of entirely new communication platforms. Advances in digital technology continually push forward the boundaries of communications possibilities. Innovations emerge rapidly and haphazardly. Digital media run the gamut from formats that resemble offline counterparts or perform similar functions to traditional media, such as the websites of mainstream newspapers, to truly novel formats that facilitate new ways of relating. In the 1990s, early forms of digital media—email, websites, blogs, and discussion boards—afforded users unprecedented opportunities to monitor, comment on, create, and distribute information. Social media that make sophisticated use of the interactive capacity of digital tools came to prominence in the mid-2000s. Wikis allow people to work collaboratively on projects and documents. Social networking sites, like Facebook and Pinterest, help users to make and maintain contacts, share information, connect with others with similar interests, debate, and organize events. Microblogs, like Twitter and Tumblr, and text messaging services let people share snippets of content with others in their networks and follow events as they unfold. Content-hosting sites, like the video-sharing platforms YouTube and Vimeo, serve as widely accessible repositories of material that can be immediately retrieved. Virtual games and social worlds, like Second Life, not only allow players to make friends and have fun, but also are used for teaching through simulations that require students to do research and develop decision-making skills.

New media are distinct from traditional media in a number of ways. They have robust interactive capabilities and readily facilitate the development of network connections. They can supersede temporal, geographical, and socioeconomic boundaries. They are able to subvert mainstream media organizational hierarchies, and offer average people enhanced opportunities to become engaged. Mainstream news organizations

increasingly rely on citizen-produced content to fill the void created by budget and staffing cuts. Amateur newshounds from across the globe report on events and provide analysis. New media can enable civic activism by empowering people who lack the resources to engage the political process meaningfully through conventional mechanisms. Voters use social media to take part in campaigns, creating their own candidate ads, recruiting volunteers, and organizing campaign activities outside of the official candidate and party organizations.

The proliferation of offerings has prompted shifts in audience media preferences. Individuals negotiating the labyrinth of choices are turning to specialized outlets that best suit their needs. For some people, social media have become an integral extension of their daily lives. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 82 percent of the American population was online as of April 2012. Over 40 percent of the public gets news about national and international issues from Internet sources. The audiences for digital media are dispersed among numerous sources. This audience fragmentation is illustrated by the fact that one-quarter of the electorate followed the 2012 presidential campaign on CNN.com, 10 percent on FoxNews.com, and 9 percent on MSNBC.com. The majority of voters used a plethora of other news sites, blogs, and social media sites, each drawing 2 percent or less of the population.

Eloquentia Perfecta in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities

The information age media system thrives on a steady influx of content that is produced by a wide circle of providers. Little of that content, rises to the level of rhetorical excellence. Professional information producers in the new media era have shunned textbook journalistic norms defiantly in favor of entertainment values. The public service imperative that once guided media organizations commanding the public airwaves has taken a back seat to profit-making in a competitive marketplace. Average citizens often lack the appropriate training to become purveyors of quality information.

Audience members have difficulty sorting through the glut of information available through so many media sources. Distinguishing fact from fabrication and the important from the trivial can frustrate even the most hardy information consumer. The desire to simplify choices can lead people to seek channels that reflect their own personal viewpoints while ignoring those that offer alternative perspectives. This “echo chamber” effect identified by University of Pennsylvania Professors

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella thwarts meaningful dialogue and hampers civil conversation. It contributes to increased political polarization that precludes cooperation. Political commentators dubbed the 2012 presidential election the nastiest and ugliest they have ever seen, as attacks by and against the candidates were flamed by a new media system that rewards negativity with publicity. That new media allow people to lodge attacks under the cover of anonymity does not help matters.

These developments present opportunities for educators seeking to institute the principles of *eloquentia perfecta* into the curriculum as the need to teach students proper rhetorical practices is great. Loyola University of Maryland specifies undergraduate learning aims related to *eloquentia perfecta* that are well-suited to the digital age. These are: “the ability to use speech and writing effectively, logically, gracefully, persuasively, and responsibly” and “critical understanding of and competence in a broad range of communications media.”

The first of these goals acknowledges the need to counter the unfortunate norms of digital age discourse that devalue the quest for truth and accuracy in reporting information, undermine accountability, foster incivility, and fail to promote the public good. The second aim seeks to generate awareness of the constantly shifting platforms and changing modes of conversation that are the reality of today’s media environment. It implies the need to broaden the curriculum to encompass nonconventional formats, such as 140 character limits, audio and video presentations, and mashups.

Young people are at the forefront of innovation with novel platforms and applications. They are attuned to the characteristics of new media and proficient in their use. They have been instrumental in building the information architecture that underpins the new media system and elevating its use. With proper guidance, our students can inevitably play an active role in the adaptation of *eloquentia perfecta* for the new media age curriculum. ■

A Word on Our Departing Editor

Pat Howell, S.J.

Fr. Ray Schroth, S.J., concludes his ten-year run as editor of *Conversations* with this issue. Characteristically, he is not gearing down or taking it easy. Just the opposite. His added responsibilities at *America* as literary editor will keep him busier than ever.

Because of his talent as a journalist and his breadth of knowledge about Jesuit universities, Fr. Schroth brought great suggestions, skilled editing, and creative layouts to *Conversations*.

Conversations began shortly after the Georgetown Conference on Jesuit higher education in 1989 at which Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach gave a major address. Afterwards, an urgent need was felt to have greater communication among the Jesuit universities, to share insights and best practices, and especially for lay colleagues to delve into, understand, embrace, and take responsibility for the Jesuit mission.

No one has been more central, more committed, and



Photo by Kerry Weber.

more skilled for advancing this mission on our National Seminar for Jesuit Higher Education than Ray Schroth. Our seminar members hold him in great affection, and we are consoled by knowing that he is just a phone call away for recommendations about articles, writers, or “hot” topics. He himself embodies the *Eloquentia Perfecta*, which we explore in this issue. ■

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