The promise and the peril of social action in cyberspace

Ethos, delivery, and the protests over MarketPlace and the Clipper chip

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In April 1990, Lotus Development Corporation announced a product called MarketPlace: Households. MarketPlace was to be a direct mail marketing database for Macintosh computers and would contain name, address, and spending habit information on 120 million individual American consumers. After MarketPlace was announced, computer privacy advocates began investigating the product. Although most of the data contained in MarketPlace were already available (data were provided by Equifax, the second largest credit reporting agency in the United States), privacy advocates felt that MarketPlace went far beyond current standards for privacy protection.

From Lotus’s first announcement until months after it canceled the product, the Internet was full of discussions about MarketPlace; soon, debates about the privacy implications of MarketPlace and suggestions for contacting Lotus began to circulate. People posted Lotus’s address and phone number, the email address of Lotus’s chief executive officer (CEO), and also gave information about how to request that names be removed from the database. Some people posted “form letters” that could be sent to Lotus. Notices were forwarded around the Internet, reposted to other newsgroups, and sent off as email messages. In one case, a discussion group was formed specifically to discuss the product. As a result of the Internet-based protest, over 30,000 people contacted Lotus and asked that their names be removed from the database. The product, which had been scheduled to be released during the third quarter of 1990, was never
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released. In the end, many acknowledged the role of online action in stopping the release of MarketPlace. Some subsequently called it a “victory for computer populism” (Winner 1991).

A few years later, another action took place in cyberspace. The case of the Clipper chip is based on a long history of encryption technology. Encryption involves the use of a mathematical algorithm to “scramble” electronic messages. The message sender encodes the message and sends it out across the electronic medium; the person on the receiving end must then use the corresponding decryption algorithm to descramble the message so that he or she can actually read and understand it. Encryption is used for security and privacy purposes, and its use dates back well before electronic technology.

The controversy, however, surrounding the Clipper chip involved the federal government’s proposed use and ownership of the encryption algorithm. Clipper is the name of a specific encryption chip that could be inserted in a telephone handset. When a call was made, the transmission would be scrambled, then descrambled at the receiving end. The technology itself is not what caused privacy and free speech advocates on the Internet to become alarmed. Instead, the problem, as they saw it, was with who would own the “key,” or descrambling algorithm, and who would regulate exactly which kinds of encryption programs could be used and exported from the US. The government, under the Clinton administration, proposed that all encrypted messages should ultimately be able to be decrypted by the government for security purposes. Privacy and free speech advocates, however, did not (and still do not) agree, and in February 1994, a group of privacy advocates organized an Internet-based petition drive, which generated approximately 47,000 signatures. The purpose of this petition was to defeat Clipper chip policies being considered at that time. As with the MarketPlace case, a community of privacy advocates used the Internet to disseminate technical information and organize people with common values about privacy and encryption.

This chapter analyzes the MarketPlace and Clipper protests from a rhetorical perspective. I argue that two rhetorical features, powerful and quick delivery on computer networks and a strong community ethos, were critical to both social actions because these features sustain such actions in the absence of traditional face-to-face methods of establishing presence and delivering a message. I argue that what we see in both of these cases is truly the proverbial double-edged sword. On the one hand, these cases illustrate the promise of online communication for crossing physical boundaries and allowing people of common interests and goals to meet and act across space and time. Yet at the same time, the MarketPlace and Clipper cases illustrate a certain peril: the very same features of delivery and ethos that allowed for these actions also encouraged a kind of insularity and the spread of inaccurate information, with participants trusting “the Net community” even in the face of some obvious factual errors.

Research in computer-mediated communication has long noted this dichotomy: the technology provides the opportunity for more people to communicate, but at the same time it appears to encourage a tendency toward what has been called “uninhibited behavior” (Hiltz and Turoff 1993; Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Rice and Love 1987). Yet these studies were primarily conducted in the context of discrete organizations or communities.
experimental settings. The promise and peril illustrated by MarketPlace and Clipper extend beyond individual organizations to the broader political and social sphere. Moreover, the peril in these cases is not over individual instances of flaming; it is about the exclusionary power of strong community ethos, propelled by rapid delivery across corporate, organizational, and national boundaries.

Social and political action on the Internet is still somewhat novel, yet the trend appears to be toward an ever-increasing use of cyberspace as a political arena. Much ado has been made in the popular press about the notion of cyberdemocracy; in fact, many localities and states have "electronic democracy" projects, and citizens can now write to most local and national representatives via the Internet. At issue, therefore, is how traditional rhetorical activities (such as speeches, public debates, and protests) conducted in these new online spaces differ or are enhanced or problematized by the uses of computer-mediated communication technologies. Rhetorical discourse, for example, has until very recently functioned primarily in the world of physicality. The MarketPlace and Clipper cases illustrate that while there is great promise in this new technology, participants should also be aware that the very nature of communication in cyberspace may encourage a speedy response when in fact more research on the topic may be in order. The rhetorical dynamics of online communities certainly do allow many citizens to participate, but concerns about dominance and exclusion should make us aware as we continue to design and use these systems.

I begin with a short section describing my research method. Next, I introduce the rhetorical concepts of ethos and delivery, which should be helpful for the non-rhetorician and the rhetorician alike, as I use these terms in a somewhat non-traditional fashion. This section is followed by the case analysis, which examines the promise and then the peril of delivery and ethos in cyberspace.

Rhetorical analysis of cybertexts

The Lotus and Clipper studies were conducted using rhetorical criticism triangulated with standard qualitative research methods including participant observation (done online) and interviews. For both projects, I collected all available electronic texts of the Lotus and Clipper chip controversies by searching the Internet, downloading files, and performing a brief analysis to determine content integrity. The texts are from sources including Usenet newsgroups, bulletin boards, discussion lists, email, and messages received by members of Congress and other officials. Texts were then analyzed for their rhetorical features, including the speaker's use of ethos (appeal by character), use of logos (logical argument), structure of the discourse (deductive or inductive), style (formal or informal), and speed of delivery.

Along with performing textual analysis, I observed the online forums and interviewed organizers and participants of the electronic forums. For both studies, this process involved tracing "header" information (information in the "To," "From," and "Subject" lines) of an electronic message in order to locate the author(s) of the postings. I conducted interviews primarily via email and telephone.
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I have considered material from a publicly accessible electronic forum to be published material and have treated this material as such, excerpting from text and citing with footnotes. Yet even though my use of this material is criticism and thus would no doubt fall under the fair use provisions for copyright, I have made one significant change in this material: I have not used real names of the authors of these Internet postings. Instead, except in cases where I obtained explicit permission or where the person is a public figure, I have changed authors’ real names to pseudonyms, indicated by the use of square brackets within the texts themselves and the use of quotation marks in the footnoted citations. Thus, I have cited Internet postings with accuracy and with respect for privacy balanced by a belief that material posted to publicly accessible Internet forums can and should be used by scholars and researchers.3

Ethos, delivery, and online rhetoric

The features of ethos and delivery are not new in the public speaking arena; both have been important since the early Greek rhetorics of Plato and Aristotle. But online, ethos and delivery take on new significance.

Based on their comments and on email addresses, many of the participants were computer or other professionals, often with specialized knowledge and tacit understandings about computer privacy. The character and quality in which these values were expressed is evident in what in rhetorical terms can be called the ethos of the discourse. In each case, protest postings reflect a certain group ethos: in the Lotus case, this ethos was a personal, angry, and antagonistic voice; in the Clipper case, the group ethos was also angry at times but was also highly technical. In either case, the group ethos appealed to others of similar persuasion and made it easy to spread the word and attract others with similar beliefs into the protest community.

In classical rhetoric, ethos is associated with the credibility and character of the speaker. Ethos is one of the three modes of appeal — pathos, ethos, and logos — that make up Aristotle’s system of invention. For Aristotle (1991), ethos was part of this broader conventional scheme of “finding in any given case the available means of persuasion” (1356a) and required speakers to “find” and assume the appropriate character traits for a given argument (1378a). The notion of ethos was also a part of the Roman rhetorical tradition (Cherry 1988: 255), with Quintilian’s sense of the rhetor as “a man of good character and courtesy” (Meador 1983: 166) or Cicero’s (1970) belief that wisdom must be accompanied by eloquence (B.1. C.II).4

While rooted in classical rhetoric, however, ethos is also a contemporary concept used widely to describe the character, tenor, or tone of a rhetor. In general discussion, one often hears references to “the ethos” of a particular public figure or time period. Along with this common usage, the concept has played a continued role throughout the contemporary rhetorical tradition. Throughout this chapter, the notion of ethos is based on these long-standing definitions: the values and character of the speaker(s) expressed in what has been called “a characteristic manner of holding and expressing ideas” (Halloran 1984: 71).
The focus of ethos, especially in the classical tradition, however, has primarily been on individual speakers. Yet in both the Lotus and Clipper cases, ethos was also a group quality, one which characterized the entire group by its collective sense of character and values. This notion of group ethos has been noted by Halloran (1982: 62), who suggests that the "word ethos has both an individual and a collective meaning. It makes sense to speak of the ethos of this or that person, but it makes equally good sense to speak of the ethos of a particular type of person, of a professional group, or a culture, or an era in history." Furthermore, ethos can be extended to the group persona created by communication technology. Thus, the ethos of both the Lotus and Clipper cases highlights the claim that "ethos is not measurable traits displayed by an individual; rather it is a complex set of characteristics constructed by a group, sanctioned by that group, and more readily recognizable to others who belong or share similar values or experiences" (Reynolds 1993: 327, emphasis original). During the Lotus protest, for example, electronic texts served to create and maintain a "cyber-ethos" among community members. Electronic texts were characterized by a group ethos of sarcasm, blame, anger, and concern for personal privacy, which arose out of and reflected the character and values of the individual speakers and the community. Group ethos can also leave out or ostracize those who do not agree with the majority, and this problem is often enhanced by the specialized nature of electronic discussion lists.

Although ethos is most often used to refer "to the character of an age, era, society, or culture, something like zeitgeist" (Reynolds 1993: 327, emphasis original), there are two additional ways of considering ethos that are also of special significance to online discourse. The first is the relationship of ethos to ethics. It is not just the projection of a speaker or group's character, but his or hers, or the group's, actual moral and ethical character that is relevant to both the effectiveness and the quality of the speech. In online discourse, the ethical character of the speaker often goes unchallenged; the sense of trust among some people as members of "the Internet community" is often based on a person's stated professional affiliations and subsequent contributions to life on the Internet. Individuals, such as the person who sent out a form letter in the Lotus case, are often accepted as moral and credible even though the many Internet receivers of the message have never met the message's author(s) and in fact cannot be sure authors are who they say they are.

Another aspect of ethos comes from the actual etymology of the Greek word, which, when translated carefully, becomes "a habitual meeting place," thus invoking ethos as an "image of people gathering together in a public place, sharing experiences and ideas" (Halloran 1982: 61). Once this aspect of ethos as "space, place, or haunt" has been recognized, we can begin to see ethos "as a social act and a product of a community's character" (Reynolds 1993: 327); in other words, we can see that people come to acquire a community ethos by inhabiting the space and learning its unique communication characteristics. Nowhere could this concept be more obvious than in the specialized newsgroups and other electronic forums on the Internet, where outsiders are regularly "flamed" until they have come to understand and assimilate the community ethos, and where, as both the Lotus and Clipper cases illustrate, community ethos is the basis for what information other online participants will accept and believe.
In the Lotus and Clipper cases, ethos functioned hand-in-hand with the delivery medium of computer-mediated communication. Delivery is the fifth of the five components, or canons, of rhetorical discourse, and it traditionally involved gestures, facial expressions, vocal intonations, and other physical actions and "body language" involved in giving a speech. The relationship between ethos and delivery in rhetorical theory is well noted and is quite obvious: one's perceived credibility and persona are inherently linked to the way in which one delivers a speech.

In electronic discourse, this relationship is equally important, but in a somewhat altered and novel fashion; hence Bolter's (1993: 97) suggestion that "electronic writing compels us to reconsider the classical concept of delivery." Certainly since radio and television, and even more significantly in cyberspace, delivery no longer means the oral presentation of a speech; rather, delivery is now bound up in the medium of distribution. Delivery in cyberspace means multiple, simultaneous transmissions of messages across great distance and without regard for time. Furthermore, this cyber-delivery allows and even promotes interaction between the original message author and other online participants through email, interactive live chat sessions, and bulletin boards or Usenet newsgroups; in other words, electronic technology "has made the fifth canon of delivery (medium) take on the urgency of simultaneous communication" (Welch 1990: 26). Where ethos was once conveyed to a room or town square full of people via a speaker's physical gestures, it is now sent across the world, conveyed through ASCII characters, signature files, and strong language, to thousands of individuals who can immediately respond. Often, it is those of similar interest who are attracted to a certain message, and in this fashion, communities of social action, such as the MarketPlace or Clipper forums, come into existence.

Although traditional rhetorical theory offers little of substance on the fifth canon of delivery, work by Kaufer and Carley (1993, 1994) provides useful concepts for explaining how delivery functions in cyberspace. In their study of communication at a distance, they note the features of reach, asynchronicity, durability, and multiplicity. These features, along with speed, time, and specificity, are the major components in electronic delivery and provide a language for describing delivery in cyberspace.

The promise of delivery and ethos in cyberspace

The promise of communication and social action in cyberspace is clear from both the MarketPlace and Clipper cases. In both instances, the speed and reach of online delivery along with a powerful community ethos made the issues clear and immediately accessible to thousands of people concerned about computer privacy. Propelled by their common concerns, these people continued to use the Internet to spread their messages. This feature of online communication is promising, because it allows people of common interest to mobilize quickly. This process also has direct implications for democratic action: it is cheaper to send email than to travel to a physical location, and it is certainly faster to send messages in cyberspace versus surface mail. In addition, online communication is efficient, because participants can talk directly to others who share their
values and concerns. In the beginning of each action, this online delivery and common ethos allowed both actions to come into focus quickly and easily, reaching across time and space to the specialized spaces on the Internet. Messages soon reached thousands of people of common values and interests, and this feature brought the issues into focus in short order.

In the MarketPlace case, for example, an article about the product which originated in the Wall Street Journal was quickly disseminated across the networks and became the focus for the early postings in this protest. In many computer conferences, for example, excerpts from this article appeared almost immediately. RISKS Digest, an online newsletter focusing on risks to the public in computing, for example, contained three postings about Lotus MarketPlace. Another electronic site, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) forum on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) network, also contained a reference to the Journal article:


Tuesday's (10/13) WALL STREET JOURNAL carried a Section B front page story about Lotus Corporation's new product. The name escapes me, but the product is a disk(s) with the names of millions of Americans, categorized by demographics and buying habits.8

By simply typing in messages and issuing the appropriate commands to post them, participants were able to bring the article to the attention of thousands (if not more) readers just one day after the article appeared in the paper. Although the Journal has a larger overall number of readers than the network conferences, delivery in cyberspace brought the issue of Lotus MarketPlace to the attention of a specific audience: people with a concern for computer privacy who knew how to use the networks to spread a message.

It is impossible to say how many people saw these and other early postings. Although one may obtain a reasonable count of the average number of readers to certain kinds of computer conferences, it is impossible to know how many people saw the postings by way of secondary sources. If people were to read the RISKS article, for example, and think it relevant for colleagues at work, they could copy the message from the conference and redistribute it via email or repost it to an internal company bulletin board. Delivery in cyberspace thus is much more than the speed of electronic postings; it is also the exponential process of cutting and pasting messages from one site to another and passing these messages along to numerous other cyberspaces.9

These examples illustrate the power of online delivery for defining and focusing an exigence and drawing together a community. Within 24 hours after the Wall Street Journal article, word spread throughout cyberspace about the Lotus product, and before long, specialized discussion groups on MarketPlace sprang up across the Internet. Word spread not only to those who read the conferences but also by forwarded messages via email to an unknown number of people throughout cyberspace. Because it is so easy to forward and repost notes to computer conferences or as email, delivery in cyberspace helped the controversy come into sharp focus and to do so quickly.
In the Clipper case, a similar form of delivery took place, serving again to focus the issue by quickly bringing together like-minded individuals into a community which was against the adoption of the chip. In April 1993, the Clinton administration proposed the Clipper chip as a voluntary standard for telecommunications encryption. Shortly thereafter, a number of advocacy groups began to organize. For example, a group calling itself the Digital Privacy and Security Working group, comprised of “a coalition of communication and computer companies and associations, and consumer and privacy advocates,” was formed in May; this group sent a letter to President Clinton questioning the Clipper chip. Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) also sent a letter to President Clinton in May, stating that the group disagreed with some statements of the Digital Privacy and Security Working group. Later in May, CPSR filed a suit “challenging the secrecy of the government’s Clipper chip encryption proposal” (CPSR 1993b).

All of these activities were discussed and monitored on the Internet. As in the Lotus case, specialized Usenet newsgroups, such as alt.privacy.clipper, formed quickly. Other newsgroups focusing on computers and privacy soon contained discussions, or “threads,” about the Clipper chip. For example, on April 16, the day the administration announced the proposed standard, the actual statement by the White House Press Secretary was available on many Internet sites. The statement, along with another CPSR announcement from the same time period, was widely reposted, appearing, for example, in the Computer Privacy Digest, the Privacy Forum Digest, and the RIKS Digest. By late May, postings about the Clipper chip were quickly making their way across the Internet. As in the Lotus case, these postings echoed far and wide across cyberspace within a very short time. One such note indicated that the author had obtained a faxed copy of a Clipper-related letter from Representative Edward Markey to Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown. This participant then describes how he is crossposting his note to “a few mailing lists . . . related to privacy, encryption, clipper chip, etc.” Similarly, another participant notes the many lists where Clipper information can be found:

For anyone interested, the majority of the debate is going on in the new group alt.privacy.clipper; you can also find it in comp.org.eff.talk, sci.crypt, alt.privacy, alt.security, alt.security.pgp, comp.dcom.telecom, and stray offshoots in a dozen other groups.11

In both the MarketPlace and Clipper cases, then, the speed, reach, and simultaneity of online delivery assisted in focusing the online actions in short order. Similar communities of common interest would take months or even longer to organize through traditional rhetorical means or even through more modern forms such as direct mail. But delivery in cyberspace helped bring people together within hours or days of important events and provided accessible meeting places that spanned distance and time for communities of mutual interest.

Speed of delivery alone, however, will not move people to action. In cyberspace, it was the combination of electronic delivery and a strong community ethos that focused both protests in their early stages. This ethos is a combination of shared technical values
and shared attitudes toward the technology in question. Such a common ethos was important in focusing the early postings into more cohesive online protests. This ethos is a powerful feature in online social action, because it allows people of similar interests and concerns to communicate easily. Participants in both cases were able to assume that others in the newsgroups or lists understood certain technical concepts and agreed with certain premises; a newsgroup focused on computer privacy, for example, is inhabited by participants who are concerned about privacy and want to protect their rights. Thus, participants do not have to spend time making introductory remarks or defending the premises of their statements. This "instant ethos" made it easy to reach many individuals of similar values in short order, and when combined with online delivery allowed for both protests to focus quickly.

For example, the first posting on another MarketPlace-related discussion group illustrates the common values and technical knowledge assumed by the writer:

Tuesday's (10/13) WALL STREET JOURNAL carried a Section B front page story about Lotus Corporation's new product. The name escapes me, but the product is a disk(s) with the names of millions of Americans, categorized by demographics and buying habits.

Lotus claims the new product will simply make it easier for smaller businesses to engage in the same direct marketing (e.g. direct mail and telemarketing) practices used by larger firms. But is this in the public interest, to have all of this personal information floating around without opportunity even for rebuttal and susceptible to amateur modification? Does evening the playing field for business create more equity for the persons whose data is the commodity at issue?

Lotus says you can get off their disks in the conventional way, by calling the various direct marketeers, or by calling Lotus. First you have to know about it, however, and the removal process is, so far, unverified.

It's ironic that the company founded by Mitch Kapor, who has done so much for personal privacy and commonsense law regarding the rights of information workers, consumers, and producers, now is foisting this sweet little package on the American people.

Comments?12

This passage begins with tacit assumptions about technical knowledge and privacy. The issue of a possible misuse by "amateur modification" assumes that others not only understand the technical aspects of such a phrase (the ability of someone to crack the data encryption scheme used by Lotus), but also understand and to some extent agree with its implications. In other words, beyond its assumption about readers' technical knowledge, this statement assumes a shared belief in "unethical people" who will try to crack the encryption scheme built into MarketPlace. Lotus Corporation spokespeople surely would have disagreed with the very basis of the implicit argument of such phrases, suggesting that the encryption scheme cannot be broken and that no one would really want to do such a thing because this information is already available from other sources; the participants in these online privacy forums, however, assume this unstated information as a given.
These assumed premises about privacy are also apparent in the speaker’s questions, when he asks whether it is “in the public interest, to have all of this personal information floating around without opportunity even for rebuttal and susceptible to amateur modification?” The suggestion that it is a problem to have personal information “floating around” reflects the common values this participant assumes about other members of these privacy newsgroups and lists. Furthermore, when this participant suggests that Lotus is “foisting this sweet little package” on consumers, he displays an anger and sarcasm that was also common among privacy advocates.

Assumptions about technical knowledge and computer privacy in the Lotus case thus allowed for the creation of short, direct messages that assumed the community ethos and appealed to other participants in these computer conferences. In addition, an authoritative and ironic voice offered a strong challenge to Lotus’s claims and invited other readers to join the debate. Participants spoke to a community with whom they shared technical expertise and values about computer privacy. In other words, the highly specialized nature of online communities allowed rhetorically effective messages with an appealing group ethos to be sent out to others of similar thinking. This community ethos, combined with the speed of electronic delivery, played a major role in the initial exigence that developed around the Lotus product.

The early postings in the Clipper case also exhibited a strong community ethos, which, like the MarketPlace case, shared a similar rhetorical configuration: “a characteristic manner of holding and expressing ideas” (Halloran 1984: 71). As was true with the MarketPlace postings, this ethos was powerful because of the highly specialized nature of online spaces. Early Clipper postings used highly technical language; for example, in response to the April 16 announcement of Clipper, one participant posted the following series of questions to others in the privacy community. These questions clearly assume a level of technical knowledge (“V.32 modem;” “Huffman compression”) even though the author admits in the beginning of his message that he “isn’t a cryptographer and doesn’t play one on TV”:

1. What's an "encryption" device? Is a V.32 modem one? Without another modem it's pretty hard to figure out what's going on. What about programs such as compress? With out the "key" of the compress/decompress program it's a bit difficult to decode compressed files.

5. What if I use some sort of Huffman compression and transmit the frequency table in a separate message? Common algorithm but without the "key" in the form of a frequency table it'll be a bit difficult to figure out.13

Another early Clipper-related message also invokes the same technical ethos and community awareness of other readers when the author indicates that “as you may know,”

for some years I have been pushing for a token-pin-challenge based encryption system for session as well as password encryption & this IMHO answers many questions posed by the C[lipper] C[hip].

(emphasis added)14
Similarly, the author of another posting assumes that other participants are familiar with a 1987 article in a collection published by the Association of Computing Machinery, when he suggests that "now would be a good time for all to re-read [author's] 'Reflections on Trusting Trust,' which was published as an ACM Turing Award lecture." All of these assumptions reflect the professional background, interests, and political points of view common to these lists and conferences. This common ethos among participants gave rise quickly and broadly to an online action against Clipper.

Along with technical language, the community ethos in the Clipper protest involved a level of sarcasm and anger similar to the Lotus protest. The first section of a posting from the April 27 issue of the Computer Privacy Digest, for example, is overt in its feelings about Clipper:

DEFEAT THE BIG BROTHER PROPOSAL! JUST SAY FICK NO TO THE PRIVACY CLIPPER!

This message assumes the community ethos by exhibiting anger and concern over "Big Brother" and relates this concern to Clipper, which it sarcastically calls the "privacy Clipper."

Once both protests came into focus, certain electronic form letters and petitions began to become prominent. A shared ethos made participants inclined to sign or act, and the reach and power of delivery made it easy for them to do so. In both cases, it was not long before a few texts became widely reposted and distributed. Once participants learned of MarketPlace and later Clipper, they could and did easily use email to write directly to the CEO of Lotus or the President of the United States.

In the protest over MarketPlace, the most prominent posting was "the Seiler letter," which, although initially posted to only a few sites, was soon widely available on the Internet as participants copied and reposted it across the Internet. Seiler, a computer professional at a New England computer firm, posted a long note about MarketPlace to a few Usenet newsgroups. His note contained a lengthy introduction followed by the word-for-word text of a letter Seiler had sent to Lotus. This sample letter provided an address and appropriate names to contact at Lotus, and encouraged readers to "pass this message along to anyone whom you think might care."

Before long, Seiler's note had spread over cyberspace. His note was posted to newsgroups, reposted to others, and forwarded on email. Seiler himself says "[I] very quickly started getting echoes — quite literally, as I received a number of copies back again with long forwarding lists — sometimes entirely inside the company, and sometimes from the outside." The preface to one of these messages illustrates exactly how extensively postings were traveling across cyberspace:

The next entry is a long one sent to me by my good friend [S___S___], who is the policy advocate for the activist Telecommunications Workers Union in British Columbia. He took it off a net somewhere.
In this example, Seiler's note was taken from a newsgroup or other Internet source ("off a net somewhere") by a "policy advocate" (S___ S___) in British Columbia, forwarded back to the US as email to the above participant, and then posted by this participant to a new online forum. Embedded in the full posting are other header messages, indicating that the author's friend "S___ S___" took the note from an online forum called the Progressive Economists' Network. According to a story in FC Week, in which Seiler was interviewed, the note "reached computer buffs as far afield as Saudi Arabia" (Fisher 1991).

Seiler's message appealed strongly to a collective ethos of anger and concern over MarketPlace. It was selected, out of many electronic messages, over and over again until it became a prominent posting in the debate. Such a process gave great power to online participants, for it allowed them to select a representative message by community consensus and redistribute this message with great reach. The protest over MarketPlace cohered in large part around the Seiler and other postings as they moved, as one participant put it, "like an electronic wave going 'round the world." This was a wave built by many individual actions, not one individual or group posting or organized plan. This process represents a great promise for open communication in cyberspace, because it promotes rapid reposting and is not hampered by the sort of gatekeeping functions so common to the mass media.

The Clipper debate also inspired form letters that were also reposted across the Internet, appearing on most of the privacy and Clipper newsgroups. A petition begun by CPSR ultimately became, like the Seiler letter, a prominent text in the protest. The petition came to represent the attitudes and concerns of participants; in addition, it offered a built-in process to simplify participation: with the few keystrokes it would take to type the phrase "I OPPOSE CLIPPER" and press "send," individuals could "sign" the petition. The petition began with the phrase "Electronic Petition to Oppose Clipper . . . Please Distribute Widely," and then provided these simple instructions for signing (CPSR 1993a):

To sign on to the letter, send a message to:

Clipper.petition@cpsr.org

with the message "I oppose Clipper" (no quotes)

You will receive a return message confirming your vote.

Attached to these instructions was a letter to President Clinton, to which all of the electronic signatures would be attached.

The Clipper petition was also circulated widely. Although initially posted by CPSR, the petition appeared on virtually all privacy, encryption, and computer-related newsgroups, then quickly spread across the Internet to other newsgroups, lists, and email addresses. Like the Seiler letter, the petition to oppose Clipper was posted and reposted via the speed and reach of online delivery. Note the following, for example, which is a reposting of the Clipper petition to PACS-L, an electronic discussion list for librarians:
Like the Seiler letter, the Clipper petition made its way across cyberspace, providing focus for the debate. In addition, the petition offered an immediate mechanism for gathering signatures. This feature could be very powerful to future online activists, lobbyists, and others.

The peril of delivery and ethos in cyberspace

Although delivery and ethos in cyberspace suggest great promise for online social action, these rhetorical dynamics also require us to view cyberspace with a critical eye. These features may at the same time encourage the spread of inaccurate information and promote an insider status that leaves out dissenting voices.

Let us revisit the Seiler letter and Clipper petition. In each case, these texts were widely posted and became prominent in the debates. Yet as this section illustrates, online communities often become self-selecting and may not challenge information obtained in cyberspace forums. Instead, participants choose to believe and subsequently post and repost because certain messages appeal to their shared values. The speed and ability to rapidly edit and repost heightens this process, so that messages with strong appeal may be reposted widely with very little critical review of the informational content. This ability to appeal to shared values is very helpful in terms of allowing people from vast distances to come together in virtual space, but on the other hand it can and often does promote insularity. The Seiler letter and, even more dramatically, the other widely circulated message protesting MarketPlace, for example, contained numerous inaccuracies, which were rarely if at all challenged by other participants. In fact, the process of reposting to other privacy groups on the Internet only added to the inaccurate information, as new information was added with each reposting.

Seiler's letter, for example, states the following:

Second, pass this message along to anyone whom you think might care. To me, this is not just a matter of privacy. Lotus is going to sell information behind our backs — we are not allowed to dispute their data or even know what it is. Worse, Lotus is going to sell rumors about our income. Still worse, they will do it on a scale never before achieved. This should not be tolerated. Please help to stop Lotus.

(emphasis added)
Lotus was not selling "rumors about our income." Rather, the company obtained income range information from credit giant Equifax and incorporated this range into the database. Furthermore, it is questionable whether Lotus MarketPlace would spread this information "on a scale never before achieved." Although the product did in fact have serious privacy implications, the scale of distribution would probably not have exceeded the everyday distribution of information by companies such as Equifax or TRW. Yet since Seiler's information came not from Lotus itself but rather from sources within the online privacy community, the letter is not completely accurate. The appeal of ethos, however, was more powerful to online participants than was the desire for accurate information. Indeed, the preface to this letter begins by noting that Seiler did not check his "facts" with Lotus but rather with someone who had "an excellent reputation on the Internet."

A more detailed and striking example of inaccuracy is illustrated in the following passage from the other dominant posting:

Lotus "Household Marketplace":

In one [sic] database, the combined knowledge may include such things that we normally expect to consider private:

- family members' names, gender, and ages (!)
- address and home phone number
- annual salary
- debt-to-earnings ratio
- net worth (house, cars, misc. household items)
- investment portfolio (stocks, CD's, etc.)
- self and spouse employer info
- health and life insurance plan info
- schools attended by my children
- kind of car(s) I own
- kind of computer I own
- kind of stereo equipment I own
- kind of video equipment I own
- kind of household appliances I own
- who knows what else?... 

This list is an exaggerated and inaccurate account of MarketPlace. In fact, most of the items on this list, such as kind of car or computer owned, were not included in the Lotus database. Even items that were included are reported inaccurately here; for example, this list says "annual salary" when what MarketPlace actually contained was a salary range for each household. Furthermore, none of the MarketPlace data came directly from warranty cards (although the data provided by Equifax may at one time have been compiled based on warranty information). Nonetheless, because the author(s) of the above list were under no obligation to check sources, the posting is inaccurate and adds to an already emotive and extreme ethos. The strong belief in other community members can easily promote inaccuracies, which, given the rapidity of online delivery, can easily
grow and become compounded with each new posting. Within weeks, both messages had wide circulation and had in essence become dominant in the MarketPlace debate. The power of delivery and the appeal of ethos provided for these texts to circulate widely, despite their inaccurate information, because these postings resonated with others on the Internet. Subsequently, the online protest soon had generated over 30,000 complaints to Lotus Development Corporation.

Furthermore, there existed a tacit trust in what participants thought of as “the Internet community.” In both cases, this involved trust for the online community versus distrust of “Big Brother” in the form of Lotus or the government. This trust in community allowed Larry Seiler, who was clearly opposed to his personal information being pressed onto CD-ROM and distributed by Lotus, to post his home address across the Internet:

198 L__ Street
B__, MA __
December 6, 1990
Lotus Development Corp.
Attn: Market Name Referral Service
55 Cambridge Parkway
Cambridge, MA 02142
Dear Marketeers,

I do not want my name included in your “Household Marketplace” CDROM database, nor that of anyone in my family, at any address I have ever lived at. To be specific, please make sure that the following entries are **NOT** included in your database:

any last name (especially Seiler, S__, P__, or Z__) at 198 L__ Street, B__ MA

any Seiler family name at 53 O__ Street, W__ MA

any Seiler family name at 77 R__ Road, H__ MA

The apparent contradiction in Seiler’s letter was noted by a few participants on one conference, where the following exchange took place:

**Interesting that Seiler did not mind his name and address and a narrow expression of his political views going on over any network. That’s a lot more telling than a single entry in a CD-ROM.**

... A telling point ... which I'd been mulling over. As we discovered in the Journalists' topic, there's a perceived community implicit in any electronic network (even a broad one like the Internet) that does not exist in a mere mailing list. Part of it is the cultural tradition of mutual respect which has emerged over most conferencing systems ...
This “cultural tradition” extended itself to the text of Seiler’s letter as well, which also contained an overt expression of his belief in one member of the “Internet community”:

In interviews, Lotus has said that individuals will NOT be able to correct their own entries, or even see what they are. I didn’t try to confirm this in my call to Lotus, but I did confirm that the person who reported it — R. S. of [company name deleted] — has an excellent reputation on the Internet. Also, everything he said that I checked with Lotus is absolutely accurate. Further, the Wall Street Journal has reported on it — saying that the database has ages, marital status, and other such personal data as well.

(emphasis added)29

This trust in a perceived community was a large part of what made the Lotus protest successful. The Seiler letter was spread far and wide, with little concern for the fact that the accuracy of his information came from someone with no connection to Lotus Corporation but rather who had “an excellent reputation on the Internet.”

In the Clipper case, a slightly different but no less troublesome form of insularity was involved in CPSR’s petition. Although the petition, researched and carefully distributed by CPSR, was perhaps more technically accurate than the material surrounding the MarketPlace protest, it nonetheless offered a strong ethos, and because participants could sign it quickly with a few keystrokes, the content was rarely, if ever, challenged. Although some privacy advocates did in fact raise questions about CPSR’s dominance in the debates, this discussion did not inspire much, if any, challenge to CPSR’s position. Participants seemed to sign the petition without doing any sort of background research, and some people noted that this tendency might make the government less likely to take the petition seriously. It appeared that participants trusted CPSR and were bound together by a common ethos that distrusted government.

Beyond the petition, certain postings did not even need an author’s name to inspire this trust. In the Clipper protest, this trust was evident in the mass reposting of an anonymous message. Shortly after the announcement of Clipper, the government decided that it would hire a company called Mykotronx, a manufacturer based in Torrance, California, to be the primary manufacturer of the chips. In October, a long posting suddenly appeared on the privacy discussion groups and soon spread to other sections of the Internet. This posting contained detailed financial and other corporate information about Mykotronx, and included this comment from its anonymous author:

Here are excerpts of the general ledger of Mykotronx, the Torrance Based Big-Brother outfit that is going to make the Clinton Clipper wiretap chip. I have left off their chart of accounts numbers, since you don’t care about that. Do not reveal the source of this document (me) to anyone30

The author of the posting had used simple Internet tools to remain anonymous. Yet even though the posting did not contain any indication as to its origin, the information was widely accepted as true by others who trusted the Internet privacy community.
Both cases thus illustrate that in cyberspace, certain voices/texts can easily become dominant, whatever their level of accuracy. Thus, it can be argued that while both cases show the great potential for individual expression and free speech on the Internet, this model is not without its problems. The power of community *ethos* is heightened in cyberspace. Postings that appeal to community standards and are perceived as important, true, and credible will, if these two cases stand as examples, be reposted widely and quickly. Those participants who do not agree are often left on the side, and there is nothing inherent in the structure of the Internet itself to suggest otherwise. In fact, the current structure of the Internet is very much the classic double-edged sword: while it allows many people to connect with each other across space and time, it may also, especially in the discrete communities of Usenet newsgroups and discussion lists, offer fertile ground for unchecked information and insularity.

**Summary: beyond promises and perils**

Perhaps the most obvious promise of communication in cyberspace is that the new technology holds great potential to provide space for many more voices than have ever before had access to such a powerful communication medium. Television, though its reach is vast, cannot be interacted with, and most people do not have the power to purchase a television station or even buy air time. Call-in radio programs also cannot compare to the growing number of Internet newsgroups, chat sessions, and mailing lists. Part of this potential lies in the fact that delivery with these new communication technologies is extremely efficient. The speed and reach of one email message with a single keystroke is vast, and is also extremely targeted: online participants can reach thousands of other people who are specifically interested in a certain topic.

Furthermore, the current Internet structure flattens hierarchies, allowing people to correspond with each other regardless of corporate position or rank. In the Lotus case, for example, people did not need corporate credentials or even an appointment to send email to Jim Manzi, the then-CEO of Lotus. And in the Clipper case, many participants sent email expressing their anger and concern about the proposed encryption standard directly to President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and other public officials. Even within online communities themselves, hierarchy is often flattened, especially in the non-moderated conferences and newsgroups where there are no official gatekeeping structures in place. The current shape of the Internet seems to thus offer the potential for expressions from the *vox populi*.

Yet these same features also bring with them many potential problems and difficulties. Online, it appears that speed may superecede accuracy and that the beliefs of the community may preside over the responsibility of citizens to make informed decisions. In our age of rapid-fire response, it is easier to simply send off a quick email than it is to research a decision. This cumulative behavior, promoted by the highly specialized nature of online communities, does not always cultivate an open atmosphere and instead may leave out those who are on the margins and do not assume or feel
comfortable with the prevailing community ethos. Furthermore, the flattened hierarchies and open forums of the Internet can promote the spread of inaccurate information.

How then should we consider the future of online social action? If it is true that all technologies bring with them both promise and peril, what can we do to inspire more of the promise and less of the peril? At the risk of sounding too much like a pure academic, let me suggest that we begin by aggressively performing close case studies of actions such as MarketPlace and Clipper. These sort of online actions are still very new, and the complexities of these and other cases could provide needed data for designers, funders, and government bodies involved in the new national information infrastructure (or whatever the Internet of the future may be called). Social scientists, rhetoricians, language scholars, and others from the traditionally humanistic perspective should work together with computer scientists and industry or government agencies to bring this needed perspective into the policies of cyberspace.

Notes

1 Portions of this chapter appear in Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace, published by Yale University Press (see Gurak 1997).
2 This method is based on neo-Aristotelian criticism, focusing on the five canons of rhetoric.
3 The use of electronic texts and the electronic forum for rhetorical analysis presents a number of novel methodological issues, from copyright and fair use questions to technical concerns of retrieving and storing texts (see Gurak 1996 or Appendix in Gurak 1997).
4 Greek and Roman rhetorics, specifically those associated with Aristotle and Quintilian or Cicero, had distinctly different ideas about ethos, however. Whereas Aristotle's rhetoric spoke primarily of finding the available means and using them, Romans such as Quintilian or Cicero placed far greater emphasis on the rhetor as someone who embodied civic good (Johnson 1984). Yet my point here is that the general notion of ethos as character has been a strong part of the entire classical tradition and has been carried down into contemporary rhetorical theory.
5 In discussing the online technology of hypertext, for example, Bolter (1993: 107), noting that “what we mean by the voice of a text was in ancient terms [called] persona or ethos,” suggests the existence of a “hypertextual voice.”
6 In classical rhetoric, delivery was one of five canons, or parts, of the rhetorical system. Ethos, for example, was part of the first canon of invention. The next two canons, arrangement and style, involved how a speech was organized and in what stylistic manner it was constructed. The final two canons, memory and delivery, were important to ancient rhetors, for whom public speaking involved a good memory and an ability to deliver before a live audience.
7 Both the fourth canon of memory and the fifth canon of delivery have traditionally received little theoretical treatment (except for the limited work of elocutionists during the eighteenth century); Connors (1993: 65) notes that “the status of the last two [rhetorical canons], memory and delivery, has always been problematic.”
This entire process would take only a minute or two using fewer than ten key strokes, thus providing one illustration of the explanatory power of Kaufer and Carley's (1994) principles of distance communication in relation to delivery. First, the principle of multiplicity, which they define as "the number of communication partners that can be communicated with at the same time," is illustrated by the many people who read and coalesced around the early postings. Second, availability of these messages to anyone at any time shows the "asynchronicity"; the freeing of network participants "from having to work at the same time," thus overcoming the distances of both time and space (Kaufer and Carley 1994: 34).


"R______, B. Roger." Electronic message to Privacy Forum Digest 2.13. 22 April 1993. Posted 18 April 1993 09:44:41. Note: "IMHO" is a common online acronym for "in my humble opinion."


Seiler, Larry. Electronic letter distributed to many sites on the Internet. Excerpted here from author's original posting and used with permission. 2 Dec. 1990.

In various edited forms, I have documented numerous "echoes" of Seiler's letter, including December 20 on the WELL and December 30 on both Telecom Digest and Telecom Privacy Digest.


"D______, Greg." Electronic message to PACS-L electronic mailing list. 3 Feb. 1993 14:46:24 CST.

Seiler, Larry. Electronic letter distributed to many sites on the Internet. Excerpted here from author's original posting and used with permission. 2 Dec. 1990.


Because of the nature of online writing and delivery, it is difficult to know how to properly give credit for certain online postings. The above list is an example. The excerpt of this posting used here has actually been copied by two people before being pasted into the final note. I have given credit to the person who posted the final note, although this person is not the author of the passage cited here.
References


