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## On Being Useful

### Rhetoric and the Work of Engagement

JEFFREY T. GRABILL

It is commonplace to think that when we are doing the work of rhetoric, we are speaking or writing. Certainly when we teach students to be rhetors, we are teaching *them* to speak or write purposefully. The speaker, writer, composer, performer is the center of our attention. In similar fashion, it is common to think about community engagement in terms of ourselves—the work that we are doing, the impact that we hope to have, and the way that our presence changes a community. As rhetors we speak; as engaged scholars we act. I begin this way to highlight the fact that the agencies with which we most concern ourselves are the agencies of writers, researchers, and activists, and that when we consider these agencies, we focus mostly on ourselves or those we train to be like us. In this essay, I want to take us in a somewhat different direction. I want to explore the notion that the public work of rhetoric might be to support the work of others—to help other people write, speak, and make new media and other material objects effectively.<sup>1</sup>

To be able to support the work of others requires ways of researching, acting, and otherwise performing in communities that are carefully considered. My procedure in this essay, therefore, will be to outline elements of what I think of as a methodology of engagement, or elements of a theory of how to act that stands a good chance of being useful to others engaged in the "knowledge work of everyday life," a concept I develop in *Writing Community Change*.<sup>2</sup> I discuss two methods that are fundamental to rhetorical engagement. These are methods that are well known under a number of names, but they lack, in my view, the attention and visibility they deserve. These two methods— assembling a public and supporting performances—are essential to effective public rhetoric and fundamental to the notion that rhetoric might more usefully be understood as enabling the work of others.

## ASSEMBLING A PUBLIC, COMMUNITY, GROUP, OR OTHER AGGREGATE

I do not mean the title to this section to sound flippant. Scholars and activists argue passionately about the differences between these terms and their meaning for their work. And they should. Nor do I think that these terms are substitutable. Rather, because I am trying to work at the level of methodology, I highlight the theoretical problem of assembly, a problem that is shared by those working with various forms of "groupness."

The difficulty of understanding the public (or various publics) and locating it with precision and usefulness is a common and recent concern. Even if we attempt to locate a rhetorical public instead of defining it, we are still left with multiple places and terms in the literature: public space, public sphere, civic/civil society (and space), and civic culture.<sup>3</sup> Each of these terms means something quite different, both in terms of what a rhetorical situation looks like and in terms of what a particular rhetoric looks like. While it is true that recent work in rhetoric theory on the problem of the public is full of possibility, it does not typically concern itself with what I understand to be empirical questions of how people create public spaces, forums, or what I will soon call "things."<sup>4</sup> My purpose here is to focus on the activity of making a public, of understanding who we are together when we are doing rhetoric, because this type of activity is required for public engagement.

In his recent essay in *Critical Inquiry*, Bruno Latour argues for a new kind of criticism, one that is both closer to facts and positive—by which he means a criticism concerned with making. Latour wants criticism to be a "multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence."<sup>5</sup> What Latour understands as a "thing" is what I would like to understand first as both a group (including conceivably, "a public") and the ideas and activity that give a group a reason to exist. Latour's project has a descriptive component to it ("to detect") but also a strategic component. The critic—the rhetor—offers participants places to gather and cares for gatherings. This essay by Latour provides something conceptually powerful given my experience helping to make things in communities: a purpose for contemporary public rhetorical work—to gather and care for things.

Based on my own experience as a community-based researcher, I have never found it useful, either empirically or conceptually, to understand the collectives with which I was working as fixed or in some cases preexisting entities. The implications of this sentence are significant, not obvious, and at the very heart of my argument. Latour is useful in helping to visualize these implications. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour's most recent and explicit treatment of what is commonly known as actor-network theory, his target for criticism is social theory and the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> He writes that with normative

social science, the concept of "the social" is a domain asserted to exist and given, depending on the sociology, certain defining characteristics. Sociologists of the social are therefore able to use "the social" to explain other activity. The basic question for Latour is this: does the social exist or is it something that we create? Latour writes, "Whereas sociologists (or socio-economists, socio-linguists, social psychologists, etc.) take social aggregates as the given that could shed some light on residual aspects of economics, linguistics, psychology, management, and so on, these other scholars [like Latour], on the contrary, consider social aggregates as what should be explained by the specific associations provided by economics, linguistics, psychology, law, management, etc."<sup>7</sup> Latour's point is that social aggregates must be explained and also that the social is "a type of connection between things that are not themselves social."<sup>8</sup> The social, then, is not a domain or realm but a "very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling."<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of methodology, Latour's assertion that the social is best understood as a type of connection that is visible because of movement (activity) is true as well for what we call "community" or "public," an argument that I have made in more detail elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Each must be assembled and continuously reassembled. But Latour's claim is true for that which we call "the rhetorical" as well. The study of the rhetorical, therefore, is the study of particular kinds of associations that are actively created and re-created. The rhetorical is and creates particular kinds of connections. Furthermore, to be useful as a public rhetorician or engaged researcher is to become one who understands associations and, in understanding them, becomes a creator of associations. To associate, therefore, becomes a method and strategy for a methodology of engagement. It is true that the sociologist and the rhetorical scholar study different kinds of associations—or just as often make visible similar associations but understand them differently. But associations of what? If the work of the rhetor is to help gather and care for these gatherings, then what, exactly, is to be gathered and cared for—and in what ways?

To illustrate this methodological argument, let me turn to two examples from recent work that I have been a part of. The first example comes from a project Stuart Blythe and I worked on in a community we call "Harbor."<sup>11</sup> Stuart and I were part of a Technical Outreach Services for Communities (TOSC) team, funded by an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant, to complete independent technical reviews of science and engineering and to conduct community education workshops around those technical reviews. Our presence in Harbor was a function of a proposed U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plan to dredge a canal linking an industrial area with a large lake. The canal at Harbor is one of the oldest industrial corridors in the country. The canal was designed to service the petroleum-based and steel industries in the region. The canal must be dredged in order to enable heavier barge traffic to reach the industry along the canal. The Corps plans to scoop out millions

of cubic yards of sediment and deposit them in what is called a confined disposal facility (CDF), or a raised landfill, which is located near two schools and residential areas in this densely populated area.

This is a situation in which there is significant community concern. The industrial uses of the harbor and canal have left the waters heavily polluted. Some of the toxins found in the sediment include arsenic, cadmium, chromium, dioxin, toluene, lead, mercury, oil, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)—all bad stuff for plants, animals, and humans. Some stretches of the canal are so toxic that they cannot sustain life. Therefore, this navigational dredge is also necessarily an environmental cleanup project, but it is an environmental cleanup project that results in the deposit of toxic sediments in a landfill located in an urban area. Cleaning the canal therefore creates new risks as it mitigates existing risks. Some in Harbor are quite concerned about the dredging project; others are strongly opposed to it. Citizens have raised two concerns about the Corps' plans: whether the dredge will be characterized as an environmental or navigational project, a distinction governed by differing regulations and which type of dredge technology will be used. The distinction between the two dredging characterizations is meaningful. To call the dredge "environmental" means the ability to tap into new sources of revenue to fund the project and being governed by regulations that some in the community thought more stringent. Naming the project "environmental" carries significant symbolic value as well as certain material changes in the project.

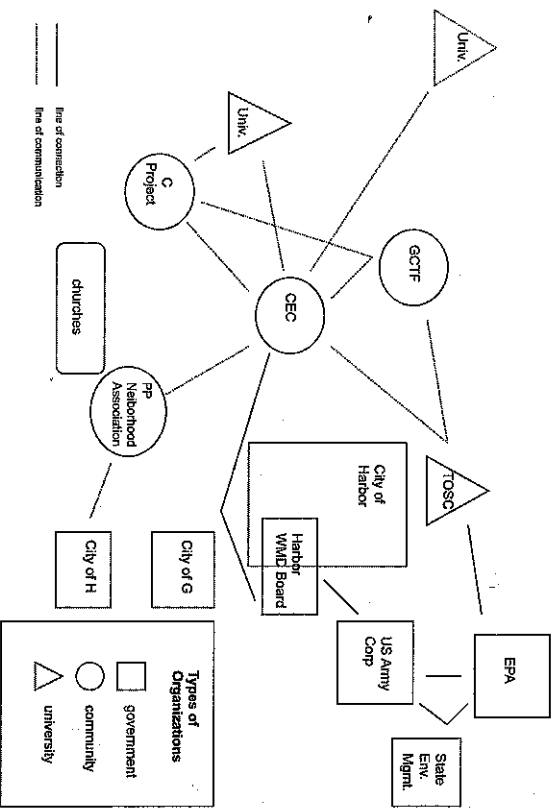
Stuart and I focused on trying to understand how people in Harbor conducted their own science (their inventional activities) and communicated those understandings to others. Our goals were to use these understandings to help TOSC with its work, and, if possible, enhance the capacities of the community to do its work. To this point I have left a number of loaded terms scattered throughout my description, and it is precisely the danger of these loaded terms that occupied much of our work in Harbor. If we were to be of use to "the community"—indeed, if we were to conduct "community-based" research—what, exactly, does this mean, and who, precisely, constitutes "the community" with which we were engaged? Figure 1 is a figure from our field notes of April 2004, and in reproducing this figure here, I mean to signify a number of things: it is one of many such maps that we created (though a relatively stable one); it is an artifact of our research and not "true" in any other sense; and in publishing this map (now twice), we have given the public space of Harbor a type of rhetorical stability *with respect to our work there* that is both useful and also only one type of connection possible in that same geographical, cultural, political, and social space at that time—or at any given time.

The community map of Harbor, then, is an answer to the question "who/what is the community" in Harbor. In terms of the functional details, there are two significant issues represented by this map. The first is that the community

is a collection of organizations, institutions, and individuals. Some of these organizations are large and highly structured, like a government agency, while others are more loosely structured, such as a neighborhood association. The second issue is the connection between groups. Some groups have more formal associations by way of funding or people who are members of multiple organizations. Some groups are networked by their communication practices. If we return to Latour and to my methodological argument that to engage is to assemble, then the activity of assembling this map is a key engagement activity opening up a range of agencies. We were able to assemble this map by paying attention to activity; that is, the connections between organizations and the relative positioning of organizations are a function of those organizations doing things: meeting, writing, collaborating, coordinating, and so on. Of course, the activity that enables this map is the activity generated by the dredging project itself, so if we were following different work, then we would see different activity, alternative connections, and therefore new groupings at this same time and in this same space. In other words, a different map, a different community.

A map like this yields patterns that are actionable. The community organization with which we worked most closely is labeled "CEC" on this map. It was not the first organization that TOSC worked with, nor was it the only important organization because it was often at the very center of citizen-driven activity in Harbor. For our work in Harbor to have an impact, therefore, it was clear that we needed to learn from CEC and support its work as best we could. While the organization is small and relatively unstructured, its members are highly effective communicators: they write frequently and with impact; they have multiple, effective communication channels; and they use these to share what they learn and to hear from others what they are learning. In methodological terms, to be useful in Harbor as an engaged partner, we had to assemble—from the first to the last moment of our time there—a "public," which in this case we understood as a "community." There is no question that there was a spatial and political entity known as Harbor before we arrived on the scene. The organizations existed. The people were there. The ideas and issues, for the most part, were surely in evidence. But in arriving on the scene, we changed things, and so there existed in that time and space a new community dynamic, which we systematically tried to account for from our point of view. We assembled the community of Harbor with respect to this project as a way to account for possible agencies. For us, this work was called "research," but it is no different as an issue of methodology if the work is called "community organizing" and the agents called "activists" or "rhetoricians." In identifying CEC as important, therefore, we were also locating finer-grained patterns of activity that we thought mattered, and so we sought to support that activity (more on this in the next section). The map, then, is

simply a research artifact, but it represents the more complex work of assembling and caring for that assembly.



A community map of "Harbor"

Example two comes from work I have been doing to help build a community media center in Lansing, Michigan. The original story for me goes back to the Capital Area Community Information research project, an action research project funded by Michigan State University's University Outreach and Engagement.<sup>12</sup> This three-year effort focused on understanding how people used information technologies to do the work of community organizations, and on the Capital Area Community Voices Web site as a key resource for this knowledge work. One outcome of this project is a newly redesigned Capital Area Community Voices Web site. As a part of that project, we began to think about the larger community infrastructure supporting community computing, and through this conversation I ended up as part of a small, ad hoc group of people who have now incorporated and are making progress in terms of building this media center. Nearly three years ago, while sitting in an early meeting of this group, one of our graduate students turned to me and said that we really needed to read *Ataraxis* because she thought that we were engaged in making a sociotechnical system.<sup>13</sup> She was correct, and as I have always understood making a media center as a project of assembly, let me unpack the example of the media center in these terms. Let me pull two threads to follow: the making of the media center as the making of a thing; and the (re)making of a research center (WIDD) into a community media center (or: when activity is what is required to be real, how to act like a media center).

The first of these threads is more abstract. There is no reason why Lansing must have a community media center. The Lansing area functions today without one, and most people in the Lansing area, it is fair to say, have no idea what a media center is and what it affords to those who may use it. To make a media center, therefore, requires argument, the establishment of an exigency in "the community." In other words, while folks get along just fine now, current work could be facilitated by a media center, new work could be imagined, and that which is impossible now might be possible with a media center (and so: perhaps we are not getting along very well at all).<sup>14</sup> The most persistent activity that we have engaged in as part of making a media center is rhetorical. It is also mundane: community groups, neighborhood organizations, issue groups, and others must always and persistently make arguments through activities like writing letters, holding meetings, and proposing ideas, and in making these arguments, gather participants in what Latour would call a "thing."

Like many who work with "thing theory," Latour works through Heidegger to derive basic concepts of a thing.<sup>15</sup> A "Thing," in this view, is a certain type of assembly and could refer to a meeting as much as to an object. As an assembly, one of Latour's references is the old Icelandic assembly called a "Ding" (thing).<sup>16</sup> In Latour's resurrected Ding, people assemble not because they are like each other or agree but because they share matters of concern about which they do not agree. A "Thing" is the issue—the matter of concern—that brings people together and also the assembly itself. In many ways, this notion of assembly alludes to traditional and stable ideas of public space, namely the forum, the legislature, the visible and well-bounded public. This trajectory in Latour's thinking is much less interesting to me as a matter of methodology. Much more important is the idea of matters of concern as exigencies for gathering and the role of an engaged public rhetoric in assembling that gathering.

To make a community media center, therefore, we had to assemble it, and that assembly is a rhetorical practice. We were required to make arguments for the need for a community media center rooted in two discourses: one about digital divides and the other about innovation and entrepreneurship. We were required to make arguments of possibility rooted in ideas about creativity, community capacity building, and educational innovation. We were required to make arguments about feasibility rooted in needs analysis, market studies, financial analyses, and inventories of various kinds. And we were required to make arguments of expediency based on a declining political economy in Michigan. To assemble these arguments required a great deal of invention on the part of groups of people working both collaboratively and in coordination. That invention, of course, required inquiries of various kind—historical, empirical, philosophical—and knowledge work of this kind requires an infrastructure: people, time, machines, networks, and various forms of capital. As

we began to have success with our arguments, our assembly began to grow as more individuals, organizations, and eventually government institutions joined, as best they could given their own interests and capacities, this thing we call the Capital Area Community Media Center.

The arguments that I describe here are invented and distributed in a highly diffuse manner, which is one of the messages of this essay. These arguments also continue to be invented and distributed (and so reassembled). To locate "public rhetoric" in a single speech or text produced by a single author—understood in either an orthodox or reformed fashion (that is, acknowledging other people)—is to make a mistake in understanding how the work of rhetoric gets done. I was present when some of these arguments were invented, most often in a series of meetings over time. Yet there are remarkably few documents associated with this project: a business plan, two one-pagers, and some proposals. Most of the arguments were invented and delivered orally. I delivered a few at a cocktail party (the mayor being one audience), in an associate provost's office, over dinner, and in many meetings in which the media center was not on the agenda. And I was just one of many who did so. One project that has been persuaded of the media center's value is the Information Technology Empowerment Center (ITec) in Lansing.<sup>17</sup> We hope that this becomes the center's home. It is possible to see in the vision and mission of ITec some of the same arguments made in support of the Media Center, in part because the projects have some people in common. They are different assemblies composed of some like elements.

The process of assembly that I have just described is abstract only in that we were assembling an *idea*, and as that idea took shape, necessarily the material, cultural, institutional, and human agencies that are part of any idea that becomes a thing. Accordingly, the second thread that I want to follow is more pragmatic and concrete and entails assembling elements of the media center's infrastructure. The methodology of engagement that I have been developing here is rooted in activity. That is, if there is no activity, there is no engagement, no thing (this is also a principle of actor network theory, a fact that is coincidental in this case). Therefore, if we wanted to assemble a community media center, then we needed to act like a community media center. To do this, we took a portion of the infrastructure of the writing program at Michigan State University and turned it into the community media center.

The WIDE Research Center is a basic research center that examines what it means to write (and learn to write) in digital environments.<sup>18</sup> I direct this center with Bill Hart-Davidson, and since its beginning, we have always understood WIDE as a community-based research center, by which we mean that WIDE is open and responsive to the needs of community partners and tries to solve problems with those partners. To generate the activity of a media center, we devoted resources to infrastructure (servers, networks, phones, offices, desks, chairs, mailboxes, and so on), human beings, and programming.

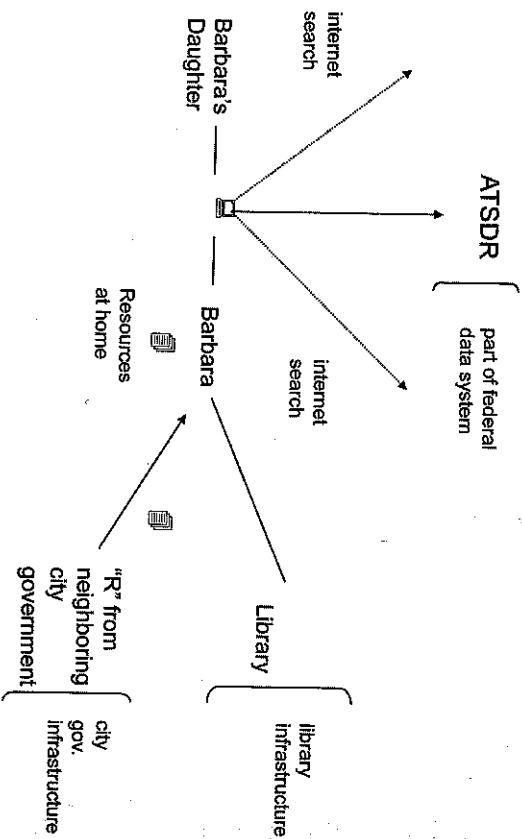
We conducted a number of workshops at various locations in the area on topics ranging from basic tool use to podcasting (we also utilized computers from the Writing Center). And we marketed this activity under the name of the Capital Area Community Media Center, not WIDE or Michigan State University. Therefore, we have been able to make the argument that we *have* a community media center that is effective, that is engaged, and that needs to grow. In other words, when I write of the requirement to assemble as part of any methodology of engagement, I also mean this quite literally. Rhetoric is always material, and it is most powerful when it makes things that enable others to perform persuasively. The two examples used here actually demonstrate three methods of assembly: research to assemble a group in order to discern patterns of activity and their possible agencies; rhetorical assembly of ideas toward the making of a Thing; and the related and always material assembly that must be gathered into any thing. All of this assembly work is required in order to be useful to others. In the next section, I turn to more fine-grained examples of supporting the knowledge work of others and to my related claim that this is a proper goal for public rhetoric and community-based research.

#### SUPPORTING THE KNOWLEDGE WORK OF OTHERS

In chapter 4 of *Writing Community Change*, I write about the inventional activities of a citizen environmental group at various levels of granularity. Below is a data display from that chapter that represents the finest level of analysis, that of the infrastructure supporting the writing of a woman named Barbara (a pseudonym). Barbara and her group routinely produce four-page documents for distribution to others in Harbor. In that fourth chapter, I call the reader's attention to a few features in the figure: the elements of infrastructure that support the work of writing a document, such as computers, computer networks, interfaces, databases, phones, chairs, desks, paper, pens, people; the elements of infrastructure that connect to larger, more distributed infrastructures, particularly data and other computer networks; and elements of more local infrastructures, such as the resources of a local public library or city government and, in this case, a local repository of documents related to the current environmental project. I argue that even at the level of a relatively simple four-page document, the activity required to write it is complex and that the writing done in Harbor to enact community change is impossible without the infrastructure to support it.

I believe in that analysis, but there is too much missing from it, namely the deeper rhetorical value of this situation. Here, therefore, I want to understand the work of this organization as the making of a thing and not precisely in terms of writing a document.

To do this, I need to zoom out from our view from the writing of a document to the situation in Harbor that I detailed earlier. Barbara is a key member of CEC. It is the work of individuals like Barbara, or more properly the



Distributed work and infrastructure supporting the writing of a document

various groupings that she is a part of and that enable her work, that are worth supporting. Before I get to this, however, let me take the time to revisit my own understanding of the activity represented in illustration above. As a writing researcher, I understand Barbara (and CEC's) activity in terms of writing, and so not surprisingly, the public rhetorical activities of CEC that consumed my attention were written practices and literacies. As a researcher, I attach significant value to the analytical power that comes from drilling deeply into composing practices, but as an analytical matter, I have always struggled to place these ways of understanding writing into a larger chain of agencies that might clearly be called "public rhetorical work." In other words, as an analytical matter, it has long been difficult for me to trace with precision a chain of activity that connects the writing of an issue summary to a given public action or impact. The ability to do so seems terribly important as a matter of research and in terms of our ability to be convincing when we say that writing and rhetoric matter to public life.

In all of the work that my colleagues and I have done to understand our work in Harbor, we have not focused on the primary rhetorical problem of this situation for community organizations, and therefore one of the key goals of a mundane document like an issue summary. The primary problem, and thus the focus of public work for citizen environmental groups in a situation like Harbor's, is to make the dredging project a matter of concern. The primary rhetorical work involved is the assembling of the participants necessary to make a thing. This is work that Barbara and her colleagues are good at and have been doing in Harbor for some time. Let me unpack this situation a bit more fully.

It may seem obvious that dumping polluted sediments in a heavily urbanized area is "concerning" if not a full-blown matter of concern. But let me describe this situation somewhat differently by assembling another set of actors in this public who seek closure (it is their job, their work, to seek closure, and they do so for reasons that are reasonable and understandable). The scene I describe here is constructed from real situations I observed in Harbor. In this scene, we assemble a government board room—intended as a public meeting room—with a particular design that enables some participants to sit in certain places that command attention and other participants to sit in places where attention is not forthcoming. Some participants stand, and others occupy spaces outside the room. Participants include human actors such as scientists, engineers, government officials, concerned citizens, each dressed (as well as positioned) in ways consistent with their status or role. The scientists, who are the heroes of this assembly, bring with them their disciplines, professions, data, and tools. Most visible in this scene are a computer, a projector, and a set of slides that show the economic costs of a canal not accessible to certain kinds of barges and an aerial photo of contaminated sediments (brown) flowing into the lake (blue). The story told here is that the canal needs to be dredged: jobs are at stake, money is being lost, and the situation is environmentally intolerable. The weight of authority insists on it, as does the cold rationality of science. A massive array of participants are here assembled to make the following argument: dredge this canal. And there is no reason not to, is there?

What does it take to make a thing here, to open up a matter of concern and resist the closure of fact, of a decision, of silence? That is, what must Barbara and others do to assemble a matter of concern? The irony is that they must break their backs to make something as delicate as a thing. The illustration on p. 202 is, for me, a tiny fragment of the work of that assembly, and the issue summarizes a key participant. It is the mediating activity of the issue summaries that Stuart and I were able to see. We were able to see how these texts made others act. They were referenced by other community groups, were used in meetings, and were one of the trusted sources for "science" in this community. Aside from this particular genre of writing, we were also able to see the related elements of infrastructure assembled to facilitate the work of Barbara and her organization, and, just as important, we were able to see how they assembled participants—how they *invented*—in order to maintain the dredging project as a matter of concern.<sup>19</sup> "The dredging methodology is safe," claims the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in deploying its massive assembly, and so let us now move on to our implementation plan. "It is not safe!" claims the citizens' group, deploying a ragtag assembly of people, machines, voices, bodies, and simple little texts. So far, the dredging has been delayed. And so the dredging project is not closed down, fixed, and decided. Closure has been refused as Barbara and her group reveal to the world as best they can



the particular assemblages of environmental toxicology, civic engineering, politics, and other such things. The public work of rhetoric is therefore visible. Rhetoric makes things.

All of that is well and good and makes for a nice story. It might also be analytically productive and serve as a useful metaphor for connecting some elusive dots for me from the writing of mundane documents to the making of public arguments.<sup>20</sup> In terms of the methodology of engagement that I am starting to build with this essay, however, a key problem is how best to support Barbara's work. If part one of this emerging methodology is the imperative to assemble, part two is the imperative to support the assembling of others. In many ways, the second part is something we do very well as a field. We research and teach performances like writing, speaking, making new media, and other such material rhetorical objects. When we teach or otherwise build capacity with others to act effectively in these ways, then we are certainly supporting the rhetorical activity of others. I want to underline, in other words, our own work as teachers in particular. We are good at it, and the work that we do matters and should matter as an issue of methodology for community engagement. But there are ways that we are not effective as well. We tend to orient more toward individuals than groups, and so as a field we would focus on Barbara's skills and performances and not necessarily on Barbara as a member of a group and that group as the writer or rhetor. As a field we tend to orient more toward the great speech, text, or the known and bounded public sphere—the rhetorical situation, the known forums of public media, the visible public conversations among our visible public intellectuals (including ourselves). We tend to miss, therefore, the mundane, the technical, the routine, the Barbaras, and the CEOs of the world. We miss the issue summaries, the research required to understand what a PCB is and how many parts per million is dangerous (and how to even imagine that metaphor in a useful way), and the endless meetings that must be attended and attended to in these less visible public moments. Transformative rhetorical work takes place in these scenes as well.

Why, then, do some assemblies come together, persist over time, and have value? Why do others not? I do not really know, in part because I do not believe it is common to see and understand rhetorical work in the way that I have argued for it here. What rhetorical research does not do very well is detect rhetorical activity as coordinated and distributed, as human and non-human, as performative in the ways that I have suggested it is performative, as a chain of agencies that is not bounded in the ways we have historically bounded rhetorical agencies. Likewise, we do not measure rhetorical outcomes much at all (including an interrogation of indicators that would help us distinguish—or not—between the rhetorical and the arhetorical). Aside from not detecting very well in a way that might provide better evidence, the reasons for the success and failure of assemblies—at least as I have been able to

determine from my own work—are due to the ability of groups to form and effectively assemble the infrastructure necessary to do the work of rhetoric. There is a tautology here, I know—to assemble effectively requires one to assemble effectively. But the requirements for successful assembly are why I root my work in technical and professional writing and have used the notion of “knowledge work” when describing what I see in communities. Rhetoric is work, a type of discursive work that is difficult to do and which is taught, often, in conjunction with what we understand as “professional work”—managing projects, coordinating activity, learning and using information technologies, working well with others, communicating effectively. These are the skills of assembly.

I am not aware of much work that is focused in quite this way on supporting the work of others and calling it rhetoric. Grace Bernhardt's recent work describes what it takes to build an infrastructure to support the proposal writing and content management of a small nonprofit focused on advocacy for women.<sup>21</sup> In order for members of the organization to advocate effectively and provide the services they promise, they need to write effectively, or more properly, assemble effectively that which they need to be persuasive. To fail at the tasks that Bernhardt was able to see is to fail, eventually, as an organization. To the extent that Bernhardt's work supported the work of this organization, she was engaged in a type of research and public rhetorical work that I want to value and make visible as methodology. To return to Latour, a methodology of engagement asks the researcher/activist/rhetor to attend to and follow the performances of group formation (the ongoing construction of boundaries, of a we); to allow actors to make sense of their social (rhetorical) world; to pay attention to the range of agencies (not precisely to who or what is the agent); to trace, with precision, “the string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator [actor],” actions that can be used to describe rhetorical work; and to interrogate the agencies at play in order to distinguish between matters of fact and matters of concern.<sup>22</sup> The results of such attention are useful to others because they render visible and actionable the scene of rhetoric. More important, the work described by this methodology is necessary to *do* public rhetoric.

#### NOTES

1. My reference to material objects is intended to reinforce the fact that most rhetorical work results in a material object of some kind, and while I do not have the time to explore a rhetoric of objects here, the role of objects in rhetorical work is important. More important and directly relevant is work on material rhetoric—specifically indigenous material rhetoric—that has been influential for me. See Ditskill, “Yelesalehe Hiwayona’; Haas, “Rhetoric of Alliance.” Sometimes rhetoric produces baskets, wampum, and other such objects. Rhetoric theory must account for them.

2. Grabill, *Writing Community*.

3. Simmons and Grabill, “Toward a Civic Rhetoric.”



4. See Asen, "Imagining"; Asen and Brouwer, *Counterpublics*; Banning, "Truth Floats"; Dahlgren, "Internet"; Edbauer, "Unframing Models"; Goodnight, "Personal."
5. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 246.
6. Latour, *Reassembling*.
7. *Ibid.*, 5.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 7.
10. Grabill, *Writing Community*. For the original, see Latour, *Aramis*.
11. Blythe, Grabill, and Riley, "Supporting Invention"; Grabill, *Writing Community*.
12. Grabill, *Writing Community*.
13. Latour, *Aramis*.
14. The politics around community media in Lansing are long and complicated. Some community media people associated with schools and government have been trying to argue for a media center for twenty years. Our most recent effort is part of that history. Of late, the media center has been part of a larger conversation about how to transition to a postindustrial economy and about the public value of community media infrastructure. This conversation takes place in a context of declining public revenues for public projects, and so the media center must compete with other good ideas. There are also differing visions of what a community media center might become and how it might best serve the public interest.
15. Latour, *Reassembling*; Latour, "From Realpolitik"; Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?*
16. Latour, "From Realpolitik."
17. Information Technology Empowerment Center, <http://www.iteclansing.org/> (accessed March 22, 2009).
18. I use the term "basic" research center to identify WIDE as an organization that seeks to identify and solve fundamental research problems associated with writing in digital environments. We identify explicitly with the notion of "basic" research and with research centers in the sciences, which is useful to us inside our university and with outside funders. We also use this language to distinguish WIDE from similar centers in rhetoric and composition that have a teaching, service, or combined mission more than a research mission.
19. In this regard, the meeting itself should not remain invisible as both technology and rhetorical performance. In some ways, this is obvious. What else do meetings do other than "assemble"? While potentially true, this is not necessarily true. But more to the point, there are genres of meetings, and when done well, they serve an ongoing function as ways of assembling, as spaces and practices for invention, and serve other communicative functions—reporting, for instance. The meeting as material rhetorical performance is completely invisible in work on public rhetoric, and this is an indicator of a problem in how we understand what it means to do the actual work of rhetoric.
20. Connecting the dots remains a serious concern of mine. Reviews of this essay asked me about impacts and audience response to some of the documents, like the issue summaries, that we saw produced in Harbor. As I have mentioned here, we did find other groups and individuals who referenced the issue summaries produced by CEC, but in this particular project, we did a poor job of connecting the dots in this way (in part because it was not our focus). Most writing researchers concern themselves with production, not reception. To pay attention to reception and outcomes requires attention over time, and it also requires serious thought about indicators—and indicators are difficult to work with. Indicators—what we can actually see and how we understand them to mean—entail questions of politics and power, questions like what should we

look for and at when trying to research rhetoric? What are we actually seeing when we notice what we think is rhetorical activity? Whose interests are served by measuring (or not) rhetorical activity? For some types of rhetorical analysis, this is a relatively easy problem. Judgments are made all the time based on an interpretation of an artifact like a text or a speech. With such an interpretation, we can determine what techniques and strategies are used, the likely audiences, and, based on this, it is not uncommon to make a judgment on effectiveness. Of course, these are, at best, indirect measures of rhetorical agency. They are also limited in terms of the number of agencies accounted for. I am not opposed to the use of indirect indicators—they are often all that we have—but I am suggesting that we have poor indicators to account for the rhetorical work that people do in their lives, and that we have paid scant attention to the impacts of that work. Traditional textual/rhetorical analysis does not help us much with this problem, as we need a different set of indicators and methods to render them visible to us. I am interested in more robust indirect indicators, and this is a project that currently occupies my time.

21. Bernhardt, *Moving Beyond*.

22. Latour, *Reassembling*, 129.

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[ PART 3 ]

Remaking Rhetoric in  
Universities and Publics