Rhetorical Analysis of Two Author Websites
By Caitlin Vander Meulen

Rhetorical Situation

I will be analyzing the rhetorical situation of the online presence created by and for published authors, and the basis for this analysis will be the author's websites. The purpose for an online presence is to provide information about the author and his/her published work for a specific audience of readers (old and new) as well as bookseller and librarians. The constraints of this situation include the limits of a website which communicates with text, images, and video and is therefore bounded by time and space. The expectation of the audience is to learn about the personal life of the author as well as to learn about their published work (its content as well as where to find it). The websites need to be open to many cultures as publishing is increasing as a global industry, with many texts being translated into other languages.

Introduction

I will be comparing two online presences as revealed in the websites of two authors: Zadie Smith and Neil Gaiman. Both authors are British, published, fiction authors. While they both write for an adult audience, Smith is known for a realism style, and Gaiman includes elements of fantasy in his fiction. The purpose of their sites is to appeal to readers by providing them with a persona to follow while also ultimately selling their published work. While their websites are likely created by professional website designers, I will be referring to each author as the creator or persona of their respective online presence.

http://www.zadiesmith.com/
http://www.neilgaiman.com/

Zadie Smith

Signs

Photo credit: Dominique Nabokov

Smith uses a photo (iconic sign) to represent her profile picture. She is looking away from the camera, signifying a reluctance to look the viewer in the eye. This creates an emotional distance from the viewer. However, her off-screen gaze also recalls daydreaming or intelligence. This fits with the overall persona being presented: that of an author who is intelligent, knowledgeable about culture and current events, and contemplative rather than rash. Also included on the website are many images of her book covers. This gives the viewer an idea of what her publications look like, providing an identical image for viewers who may see the books in stores or libraries. However, these book covers are like the profile picture in that they create distance from viewer: each cover design is composed of color and text, no other imagery to signify the kind of book underneath. In this way, Smith is almost saying that the work stands by itself and for itself; it needs no other justification or author biography to explain it.

Ethos

Smith's site provides ethos and credibility through the lens of her work, not creating a complex persona for readers to "follow." The footer of each page has a hyperlink for "Penguin Random House" which represents one of the biggest publishing companies in the United States. By this small yet significant text, we understand that Smith has a standing relationship with a corporate publisher. On the page listing all of Smith's published books, she also lists prestigious literary awards, showing credibility and letting the viewer know that her work is admired in her field.

Pathos

One area where Smith uses pathos is on her media page which includes video interviews. Smith talks about her writing life, integrating some details about her family as well. Viewers who have busy lives themselves will find they can relate when Smith mentions how she can only work on her writing when she gets a nanny for a few hours at a time. This breaks with the mysterious writer persona and gives viewers the sense that she is a normal human being with stress and struggles like many others. On her Tumblr page, Smith includes gifs of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing from their movie which shares a title with her latest work: *Swing Time.* This creates a sense of nostalgia that will appeal to readers who are interested in "classic" movies and therefore classic stories. It is interesting that this is presented as a gif, or moving image, rather than simply a photograph. This gives the page movement and interest which catches the viewers eye. These are emotional appeals; however, they are a little hidden behind the stark main page.

Logos

The layout and design of the website effectively uses logos as it is easy to navigate. The home page is simple with minimal information, a large photograph of Smith's latest book, and a menu for further navigating. This minimalist approach has a calming effect and does not overwhelm the viewer. This approach is consistent with the persona Smith has created through her work and the media; she is an artist removed from the trends and busyness of the world. Therefore, her portrayal of her work on the site is consistent with her overall persona.

There is also an underlying argument that readers should buy Smith's books, especially her latest. Buy including her newest book's bright yellow cover on her home page, the viewer's attention is immediately captured. Booksellers will notice how this cover will stand out on a shelf and be more likely to be picked up by shoppers. Readers visiting the site will be interested to know more about what's inside; the black and white font which is reminiscent of the 1930s speaks to a time that readers will likely be interested in. The font and bold colors are like previous covers that Smith's books had, thus showing readers that if

they enjoyed her previous work, they should be excited about this new one. Another tab on the website includes a special gift tote bag to readers who preorder the book. These aspects combined contribute to the argument that readers should buy Smith's books.

However, one of Smith's warrants is that readers will purchase or read her work because they have enjoyed her previous books. This might be ineffective for new readers because they will not be able to connect with Smith as well as previous readers. They can only gain a sense of her writing by reading the summaries of her books. To combat this, Smith could have balanced her logos with more pathos or elements that create a more complex online identity.

Mythos

Smith creates mythos by including summaries of her published books. By telling a brief narrative about each book, she reaches her audience by engaging them with the work itself. The goal is to intrigue readers, inspiring them to read more. For example, one description reads:

> "*On Beauty* is the story of an interracial family living in the university town of Wellington, Massachusetts, whose misadventures in the culture wars-on both sides of the Atlantic-serve to skewer everything from family life to political correctness to the combustive collision between the personal and the political."

This is an effective way to use mythos because it appeals to a reader's desire for story (after all, this a core value for readers of fiction), and it considers the constraints of website space by compressing a plot summary into one sentence. It is also assumed that the reader will be interested in cultural differences and how characters resolve cultural conflicts. While the purpose is partly to attract new readers, old readers will be familiar with the theme of cultural discourse from Smith's other narratives, thus providing a sense of familiarity.

Neil Gaiman

Signs

Gaiman also uses a profile picture on his home page, which serves as an iconic sign to familiarize the viewer with Gaiman's persona. In this image, Gaiman's hair is wild-looking, like it is blowing in the wind, making him seem adventurous. Even though his body is angled away,

his face is turned toward the camera, appearing to make direct eye contact with the viewer, which makes him seem trustworthy and insightful. Different from Smith's page, Gaiman includes symbolic signs that are up to date with social media: clickable symbols for Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc. The banner image behind Gaiman's photo is an indexical image of a forest. It's mysterious, dark green image may remind readers of a fairytale forest or at least of mystery, which lends itself to the kind of work Gaiman creates: fantasy fiction.

Ethos
The ultimate source of credibility is the placement of "Harper Collins Publishers" on the bottom of the page. Another way Gaiman uses ethos is on his About page where he places a list of his many awards for his work. This does not come across as bragging, but rather as a resume to provide the viewer a context of how Gaiman has been received over time in the literary community. He also includes links to organization of which he is a patron, such as The Open Rights Group which works to protect the right to free speech. This shows that Gaiman is engaged in current events in the literary world. In his profile picture, he is dressed in a dark wool coat and gray scarf, giving him the appearance of an "everyman," giving him credibility with readers who would be otherwise turned off if he were dressed in an elitist suit and tie.

Pathos
Gaiman is very effective in his use of pathos because he speaks to specific emotions he has with which his readers will probably empathize. Note this example from his journal:

> "Reading about what's happening in Aleppo is soul-numbing. I look at Ash and wonder what I'd do if the normal world I lived in became a war zone, how I'd cope, and the only thing I'm certain of is that I'd want to get him somewhere safe."

Here, Gaiman is blogging about current events in Syria, which appeals to many who find the events tragic. But he takes it further by relating the events to how he feels about his son, thus portraying a practice of empathy which will draw readers into the narrative. His journal creates a strong connection between him and his readers, who will feel like they know him as a person which will in turn, make them more interested in his work.

Logos
Gaiman's home page appeals to readers' sense of logos because it includes basic information they might be searching for, specifically a list of upcoming events at which fans can see Gaiman as well as a countdown widget to alert readers when Gaiman's next book will be released, thus creating a connection with viewers.

Gaiman's underlying argument is that readers should purchase his books, but it also includes a secondary argument that readers should feel included in a community that he has created. This is presented by including many forms of entertainment on his site, and the viewer feels drawn into a maze of stories, videos, and journals. If they enjoy this wandering, they will likely enjoy his fantasy books. He also includes a frequently asked questions page to answer questions his fan base might have. In this way, his site seems to be created for those who already know of and enjoy his books. For new readers, they are meant to grow familiar with Gaiman and be interested enough to

read. Of course, Gaiman also includes a countdown to his newest book, because ultimately, he does want viewers to purchase his books.

One of Gaiman's warrants is that readers will want this connection with the author. While this might not always be the case, Gaiman understands that connecting with readers online is important in the current economy of publishing. Readers are more often online than in bookstores, so his warrant is a logical assumption.

Mythos

Gaiman uses a slightly different approach to mythos than Smith; he tells stories about himself, creating a persona for readers to follow on his Journal page. He is clever in his use of story here, as he includes a narrative of his professional life side-by-side with his personal life as seen here:

> "I did a lot of things last year. I finished writing the Norse Mythology book (it comes out in February). I finished writing the six hour long Good Omens television series (the BBC will be making it this year). I did a lot of baby-raising. I endured a hurricane and a bad haircut. And I got the new novel started..."

This works well for the reader, because it makes Gaiman seem personable and likeable while including information on what he has been working on (a book that will be for sale in the future). The storytelling draws in readers but also serves as an advertisement.

Evaluation

Gaiman and Smith take very different approaches in the creation of their online personas. This can perhaps be best seen in their profile photos. Smith is turned away from the viewer, almost as if she is lost in her own imagination. This kind of imagery gives her a mysterious persona. On the other hand, Gaiman makes eye contact with the viewer, and his hair is blowing in the wind; these aspects give him a more transparent yet adventurous persona.

Smith is consistent in this emotional distance from viewers even in the book cover designs exhibited. Each cover features bold fonts and colors, but no other imagery. The reader must rely only on the text. Conversely, Gaiman's book covers always include iconic imagery to signal what kind of book it is. For instance, *Norse Mythology* features the hammer of Thor which reminds readers of other stories they have heard about Norse gods.

Smith's website focuses on her work and reveals very little about the author's personal life. This is probably intentional and could speak to an artistic philosophy of presenting textual work as independent of an author's biography. To make a more effective connection with readers, Smith could include a more detailed biography or updated blog. She could also include other imagery on her page, even photographs of her family or video book trailers to give readers a visual on her writing.

Gaiman is more effective in creating connection with readers. He presents some biographical information in his journal and questions pages, but everything he writes contributes to his writerly persona. In other words, his biography enhances his work. He also has community on his page through forums and a question page. However, since many of his readers are children

and young adults, he could include a page for children's activities or trivia to interest his young readers and reach a broader audience.

Ultimately, both authors seem to have different philosophies about connecting with readers. Smith maintains distance from readers, which puts her work on the forefront. However, while this will not turn fans away, it might prevent her from making new ones. Overall, Gaiman has a more effective website because he includes biography to connect with readers, and also includes a great deal more information on his books, interests, and speaking events. Thus, he has created a more complex persona in his online presence which could potentially reach more viewers.