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The rhetoric of outrage: Why social media is making us angry

by Jeff Rice, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2023, 220 pp., $114.99, ISBN 978-1-64336-398-1. ISBN-13, 978-1643363974

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BOOK REVIEW

The rhetoric of outrage: Why social media is making us angry, by Jeff Rice, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2023, 220 pp., $114.99, ISBN 978-1-64336-398-1. ISBN-13, 978-1643363974

Jeff Rice's *The Rhetoric of Outrage: Why Social Media Is Making Us Angry* offers a timely and theoretically grounded contribution to the study of affect, digital culture, and rhetorical theory. Against a backdrop of increasing public concern about polarization, virality, and algorithmic manipulation, Rice argues that social media outrage is neither incidental nor irrational. Rather, it is a programed, rhetorical phenomenon, shaped by layers of historical memory, technological affordances, and cultural mythologies. Drawing from rhetorical theory, media philosophy, and affect studies, the book constructs a rigorous and compelling account of outrage as a communicative logic embedded in the digital platforms that shape public discourse.

From the outset, Rice is clear that this is not a lament about declining civility or a call for discursive restraint. He seeks to unpack the rhetorical and technological dynamics that structure digital outrage. Following Vilém Flusser's notion of the "technical image" and Roland Barthes's theory of aggregation, Rice characterizes outrage as an emergent rhetorical form grounded in what he terms "outragicity"—the aggregated, layered, and algorithmically reinforced meanings that shape our affective responses online (p. 71).

Whereas much of the public and scholarly discourse on social media anger focuses on its emotional or behavioral dimensions (Brady et al., 2017), Rice reorients the discussion toward rhetorical form and epistemic function. He contends that outrage does not emerge from isolated events but from accumulated symbolic content—images, texts, memes, hashtags—that encode ideological assumptions and precondition our reactions. In doing so, Rice reframes digital anger not as irrational excess, but as a culturally situated and rhetorically legible form of communication.

A central premise of the book is that digital outrage often functions without a fixed referent. In the chapter "Digital Outragicity," Rice draws on Barthes's (1972/1957) and Flusser's (2011/1985) insight that meaning is not inherent in the image but constructed through cultural codes and user projections. A meme, an image of protest, or a controversial tweet becomes a node in a network of prior representations. Rice's key contribution here is to shift the analytical focus from the content of the outrage to the rhetorical and technological processes that structure its circulation.

For example, Rice analyzes the virality of the Gillette advertisement critiquing toxic masculinity. He argues that the outrage it generated was not necessarily about the content of the ad, but about the way it triggered pre-existing ideological aggregations—what Barthes might call the myth of "masculinity"—that were already emotionally charged and culturally saturated (p. 155). These affective responses, Rice notes, are guided by "programmatic belief," not objective interpretation (p. 15). Rice's term "outragicity" captures how signs accrue meaning across time and space, forming what Papacharissi (2015) called "affective publics"—networks of emotional response rather than deliberative engagement.

Rice's most innovative move may be his rhetorical reading of algorithms. Rice examines how they participate in rhetorical meaning-making. In the chapters "Technological Outrage" and "Algorithmic Outrage," he explains that platforms like Facebook and

Twitter/X are not neutral conduits for communication. Their design encourages emotional intensification, particularly through ranking systems that privilege high-engagement content—often outrage-inducing material. As Rice notes, platforms prompt users not only to express anger but also to perform it publicly, creating affective economies where outrage becomes a currency of attention.

Moreover, Rice astutely observes that platforms are themselves "technical images"—objects of critique that have become symbols of ideological and emotional conflict. The example of Facebook, for instance, is not just a critique of data privacy; it is a programed image of corporate surveillance, manipulation, and political decay.

In the chapter "Enthymemic Outrage," Rice explores how social media posts often function as enthymemes—rhetorical forms that omit premises assumed to be shared by the audience. A viral tweet, for instance, may present an emotionally charged statement whose persuasive force derives not from evidence, but from shared ideological assumptions. These arguments "work" not because they are logically rigorous, but because audiences already know what to infer.

Building on classical rhetorical concepts, Rice also identifies outrage as a form of epideictic discourse—discourse that reinforces communal values through praise or blame. In the chapter "Epideictic Outrage," he demonstrates how expressions of digital anger function as moral performances that reaffirm group identity. These rituals of affirmation and exclusion, he argues, operate not only in political discourse but in everyday digital practices, from call-out threads to public apologies. Rice's use of rhetorical theory offers a valuable lexicon for analyzing how outrage becomes a communicative practice that is as much about identity formation as it is about critique.

While Rice acknowledges events such as the murder of George Floyd and the ongoing visibility of anti-Black racism, these moments are primarily used to illustrate rhetorical patterns rather than to interrogate the structural inequalities they expose. This rhetorical focus risks abstracting outrage from its social and political consequences. A deeper engagement with empirical user research or ethnographic accounts of how different communities experience and deploy outrage would have been interesting. For example, what does outrage mean for disabled users, immigrant communities, or trans activists navigating digital spaces? Such inquiries would complement Rice's rhetorical insights with sociocultural specificity.

One of the book's underexplored but potent applications lies in education. Rice's framework offers a powerful lens for media literacy pedagogy. Teaching students to recognize rhetorical aggregation, to interpret algorithmic amplification critically, and to unpack the assumptions embedded in seemingly spontaneous digital discourse could deepen their understanding of public culture.

The book invites scholars and instructors to reconsider the role of outrage in civic life. Rather than dismissing it as toxic or uncivil, Rice suggests we attend to its rhetorical structure and political function. A more rigorous orientation toward outrage could support nuanced conversations about activism, allyship, and discourse ethics in the classroom.

The Rhetoric of Outrage is an ambitious and necessary book. Rice deftly combines rhetorical theory with media critique to analyze one of the most pressing communicative forms of our time. His account of outrage as layered, programed, and epideictic reveals the deeper logic of what often appears as emotional noise. For scholars of media, rhetoric, affect, and digital culture, this book will serve as a foundational text—one that reframes our understanding of outrage not as an obstacle to communication, but as a form of it. Rice does not call for less outrage. He calls for better understanding of what outrage means, how it is made, and what it does.

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