

## Noah P Wason – Research Statement

As a researcher, I am interested in intersectional approaches to digital rhetorics. My research theorizes algorithmic rhetorics and explores how to connect this inquiry to students' everyday learning. I argue that we need to think about how technologies shape our rhetorical actions which includes how we make connection with other people.

My dissertation, “Algorithmic Dwelling: The Consequences of Ethos on Social Media Platforms,” addresses recent trends in social media content recommendations that have led to increased political polarization in the United States and the proliferation of radicalizing conspiracy theories such as Qanon and #StoptheSteal. In analyzing algorithmic infrastructures, my project explores how the technocapitalist priorities designed into social media platforms amplifies more extreme content. Ethos's long-standing concern with trust, credibility, and expertise makes it uniquely suited to address how these platforms have weakened our democratic institutions. Drawing from algorithmic rhetorics, critical theory, decolonial theory, posthumanism, queer phenomenology, and indigenous materialism, my dissertation forwards an ecological conception of ethos that accounts for the intersectional connections between people, technologies, and spaces. While the first part examines numerous social media platforms including Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter, the second part consists of a case study that utilizes cutting edge digital methods for collecting data from YouTube's content recommendation system. Through their algorithmic outputs, these social media platforms carry traces of their designers' assumptions and biases that influence the rhetorical practices afforded to users. My dissertation offers both theories and methods for addressing the (sometimes dangerous) consequences of algorithmic systems that blur the boundaries between online and offline spaces.

My dissertation is divided into two parts with the first developing an ecological conception of ethos that I use to critique the dwelling practices afforded by social media platforms. In chapter one, I follow Ryan, Myers, and Jones's *feminist ecological ethe* to build a posthuman conception of ethos that focuses on the ways our technologies reflect our thinking and decision making but also the nonconscious assumptions inevitably built into them. This chapter also defines *rhetorical tethering* or the dwelling practices that allow us to construct and to utilize our ecological connections, an onto-epistemological function of ethos that recommendation algorithms supplant on social media platforms. In chapter two, I explore how Facebook's algorithms performance of rhetorical tethering on the behalf of users creates a dwelling space that disrupts their ability to deliberate and build consensus on the platform which can then lead to real-world conflicts such as the 2016 Dueling Protests in Houston, Texas. Chapter three explores the relationship between rhetorical tethering, infrastructure, and space. It examines the role that Reddit's algorithmic infrastructure played in the harassment and resignation of its former CEO Ellen Pao and traces the rhetorical infrastructure informing its design. It also examines the role the social platforms themselves serve in maintaining these online dwelling spaces. The second part of my dissertation consists of my longitudinal study of the YouTube platform. In chapter four, I draw on the methodology explored in chapter one to articulate the *algorithmic mapping* method I developed to collect the algorithmic outputs of YouTube's content recommendation system. In chapter five, I rhetorically analyze these algorithmic outputs and then map out the pathways between content YouTube's algorithms draw for users in pursuit of maximum watch-time on the platform. In chapter six, I analyze the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021 as an offline consequence of the algorithmic

tethering mapped in chapter five. This chapter also utilizes rhetorical tethering to map and analyze some of the ethe that converged to create what I refer to as an *insurrectionist ethos*. The coda to my dissertation concludes that the rising distrust in our social institutions is in part due to our increased reliance on social media platforms as trusted alternatives; it calls for future studies that work to identify the specific impacts recommendation algorithms have on human connection and communication.

I've drawn on this research in posthuman and algorithmic rhetorics in recent publications. My 2020 *Rhetoric Review* article, "Algorithmic Dwelling: Ethos as Deformance in Online Spaces," focuses on the dueling protests in Houston, Texas in May 2016 where Facebook was used to create competing protests on both sides of the political spectrum. In re-imagining ethos as a posthuman ecology, I reveal how Facebook's platform algorithms shape community perceptions, rhetorical practices, and constructions of credibility in ways that leave its users vulnerable to misinformation. My related interest in surveillance rhetorics also culminated in an invited chapter in *Digital Ethics* that examines how the algorithmic data surveillance practices of medical wearables disproportionately limits the rhetorical agency of disabled users and a 2021 *Rhetorics of Health & Medicine* article which examines the how these devices influence the relationships between patients, health care providers, and policies. I take a similar intersectional approach to rhetorically analyzing data aggregation and surveillance practices in a 2021 *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* article on pedagogical techniques.

Moving forward, my future research will continue this work through a book project and a series of peer-reviewed publications. I plan to expand my dissertation research into a book project that I will propose to the University of Alabama Press's *Rhetoric + Digitality* series. My future peer-reviewed publications will investigate the Qanon conspiracy theory's growth beyond social media platforms despite the measures taken to deliberately limit its circulation on YouTube specifically. Applying the ecological conception of ethos posited in my dissertation, this work will examine YouTube Qanon content creators and the various maps, documents, and videos these conspiracy theorists rely on to perpetuate the alternate reality they dwell within. Following Jenny Rice's work in her *Awful Archives*, I am interested in what information this conspiracy theory community finds credible and what rhetorical practices and expertise they encourage their members to engage with in order to be seen as trustworthy. As an additional ongoing project, I will examine the recommendation algorithms for the Spotify music streaming platform—which has expanded its podcast offerings by negotiating exclusivity deals with prominent podcasters including Joe Rogan—and the connections it draws between users, content, artists, and creators. This study will continue my research goal of identifying the impacts recommendation algorithms have on human connection, communication, and information sharing. I plan to present this work at *Computers and Writing* and the annual *Rhetoric Society of America* conferences.

My scholarship contributes to critically understanding the ways technologies shape our connections with other people. In understanding the rhetorical affordances and constraints of algorithmic technologies we can imagine trajectories that address existing inequalities instead of perpetuating them. Interdisciplinary in nature, my future work demonstrates possibilities for digital rhetoric research and practice when we revisit and re-imagine rhetorical concepts like ethos.