Building on Aggregate *Ethos:* A Response to Hartelius

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The intimate relationship between expertise and *ethos* is mediated by rhetoric. Complex articulations of these social, political, and rhetorical relationships are found in Reddit's r/science Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) series that allows a scientific expert to engage in an online question-and-answer period with a diverse public audience. Hartelius' response to our work examining expertise and *ethos* in the context of digital platforms like the science subreddit invites us "to consider the productivity and invention of *expertising* (as opposed to expertise), and *ethos* as the contiguity of being in a network, virtual or otherwise" (2019, 131). It's an invitation that we happily accept.

Between Expertise and *Ethos*

Clearly demarcating where a scientist's expertise ends, and their *ethos* begins is tricky given the reciprocal relationship between the two concepts. But Hartelius' criticism that we "only account for a superficial understanding of *ethos* as personal credibility" by distinguishing "between expertise as substantive competence or knowledge and *ethos* as the individually attributed state of being believable" (2019, 131) reflects a misinterpretation of the boundary work we employed when discussing the dialectical relationship between the two concepts. Hartelius appears to conflate our claim about citizen's "deference to expertise" (Moriarty and Mehlenbacher 2019, 516) with expertise itself, when in actuality this phrase signals that we are discussing deference as an *ethotic* engagement function—that is, that "deference to expertise" is a socially negotiated process.

Hartelius makes a case claiming untenable distinctions between expertise and *ethos* by positing that in our distinction "knowing is separable from the knower, and the knower in turn is separable from the various social networks of which her subjectivity as expert is in fact an effect" (131) and by further elaborating that our use of the term *ethotic* "disavows the connection to 'ethical,' [and] ignores the polysemy of *ethos* and ethics" (131). But the ethical is part of the social relationship activated when deferring to expertise and creates a dependent state on the audience to the rhetor. Moreover, we previously acknowledged that ethical qualities are a fundamental component of a rhetor's expert performance when clarifying that "*ethos* refers to the ethical character of a speaker" (515).

Our perspective presupposes that knowing, the knower, and the social network in which an expert participates are enmeshed and inseparable. Especially in an expert-to-public interaction where the translation and accommodation of technical knowledge is significant and important epistemic work that is rhetorically crafted. Even as an expert among experts the scientist must embody the role of rhetor, and the expert discourse community shapes how knowledge is communicated and created through rhetorical acts. Indeed, *expertising* requires a knower who knows things, knowers who are always embedded and constituted by their social networks.

Further, our recruitment of Aristotelian concepts are not a matter of convenient terminology, but a theoretical orientation that recognizes that a "rhetorical perspective on the complex concept of expertise is not limited to *ethos*, as even Aristotle recognized that one must use inartistic proofs (evidence that is not created by the rhetor/speaker) alongside

other artistic proofs like *pathos* and *logos* to persuade an audience" (Moriarty and Mehlenbacher 2019, 515). Hartelius' response suggests a simplification of our argument, as we, in citing Hartelius herself, caution that "*ethos* is but one profitable way to investigate the rhetoric of expertise because '[e]xpert knowledge requires expert performance'" (516).

The simplification is forgivable given our focus on heuristics and methodology that involves attending primarily to platform affordances like hyperlinked content, flair, karma scores, and upvoting and downvoting capabilities. In limiting our scope Hartelius observes that "at best, *ethos* is here the expert's meta-information" (2019, 131). We'd like to clarify that *ethos*-assessment heuristics—those cognitive shortcuts that help AMA audience members determine whether a participating scientist is performing as an expert—are reliant on cues that express that kind of meta-information, but we don't distill *ethos* itself to such meta-information.

Ethos is far more complex, and is reliant too, on the engagements between the AMA host and the Reddit audience, not just the platform architecture and introductory AMA text. Indeed, the *ethos*-assessment heuristics identified in our research contextualizes how some interactions unfold in the AMA, interactions which would certainly provide more holistic evidence of *ethos* and inartistic modes of expertise, but would not formulate an *ethos*-assessment heuristic. And it is the *ethos*-assessment heuristics we explore and not the full range of *ethotic* possibilities and realizations. By limiting our analysis to *ethos*-assessment heuristics we do not mean to limit *ethos* in its entirety, but rather draw attention to the ways in which the architectural affordances of the platform participate in constructing the expert *ethos* of a scientist within Reddit's community, with matters of trust and shared values implicated here.

Morrison's (2013) seminal work on coaxed affordances in digital spaces strikes an important chord here. While Morrison looks specifically at the Facebook status update feature, her observations, that the designed environment of software platforms elicits certain behaviours, are equally applicable to other social media environments. When applied to concerns of *ethos* in the r/science AMA series, coaxed affordances that elicit tacit judgements about expertise certainly bear significant influence on *how* users receive the discourse that emerges within that particular digital space. Certainly, one might consider the kind of flair that is displayed by redditors asking questions of the AMA host.

In r/science, flair is given by moderators only to certain redditors who apply through the "Science Verified User Program." r/science indicates that their verification program gives flair to those who provide evidence of a college degree or higher in science, and that this flair denoting a redditor's expertise (e.g. PhD | Chemistry | Synthetic Organic) allows "trained scientists, doctors and engineers to make credible comments in r/science," with the intention being to "enable the general public to distinguish between an educated opinion and a random comment without a background related to the topic" (nate 2016). The interaction between an AMA host and a redditor with flair indicating that they are also some sort of scientific expert would provide context for other redditors in interpreting how this apparent expert-to-expert interaction unfolds, and the kind of expert-status redditors attribute to those participants. In such a scenario, redditors would be informed by the kind of *ethos*-assessment heuristics that we've analyzed, but equally significantly by the content and quality

of that interaction. Thus, reliance on *ethos*-assessment heuristics are but one productive node in what Hartelius might call the networked system of *expertising* and *ethos*.

Constructing *Ethos* through Complex Expert Performances

Hartelius also asks, "do the architectural affordances identified in the essay work the same way for other experts as for scientists?" (2019, 131). And the answer is both "yes" and "no." Within the r/science subreddit, it is rare for non-scientists to participate as a host in an AMA—the exception being "established science journalists working for respected science news organizations" ('Science AMA Series Submission Guide' n.d., 2). You can imagine that when a science journalist hosts an AMA, similar *ethos*-assessment heuristics would be deferred to—flair, hyperlinks to science journalism work, how upvoted/downvoted the AMA is, and so on—but they would be judged as an expert-journalist rather than an expert scientist. In such a scenario, the architectural affordances coaxing redditors to make implicit judgements about *ethos* would work in largely the same manner, but the frame of reference for adjudicating that expert would shift slightly. While attending to this shift in reception and assessment of an expert science journalist fell outside the purview of our research, it certainly invites scholarly analysis.

I would be remiss if I did not gesture to a particularly interesting and noteworthy exception to the traditional focus AMAs have on scientific research: an AMA hosted by March for Science organizers who, while scientists, did not discuss their research but rather their involvement in advocacy work (March_for_Science 2017). Indeed, this important exception speaks to another, familiar question that Hartelius grapples with about how scientists might maintain a scientific *ethos* privileged by the technical sphere (see, for example, Miller 2003) with the more holistic *ethos* that involves care and goodwill in the public sphere (Hartelius 2019, 132). It's an issue that has attracted much attention from rhetoricians of science who've recently taken up the term "scientist-citizen" in examining expert-advocacy. Syfert reflects on the emergence of the scientist-citizen by observing that "As scientists increasingly reflect on their professional and social obligations in response to contemporary sociopolitical tensions, they find a rightful place not only in the lab but also in the public space" (2019, iii).

Indeed, idealized Mertonian norms of scientific *ethos* (communism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism) often conflict with the demands of a scientist working to persuade a public audience, where an *ethos* of interest and care is an important mode of appeal. The March for Science AMA provides a particularly salient example of this struggle, as the AMA went viral on Reddit and generated lots of discussion with the March for Science organizers: the post received 9,502 points, was 83% upvoted, and facilitated 615 comments. But, as you read through the commentary, you'll notice recurring criticisms from redditors who express concerns about how the March organizers are approaching science advocacy within the March for Science movement, with some responses from u/March_for_Science being downvoted into the negatives. There's a negotiation happening here as organizers work to communicate their ethical character by constructing in tandem—sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully—*ethos*-as-lab-scientist and *ethos*-as-science-advocate, two kinds of expert-performances that rely on oft incompatible allegiances

to empirical science and political interests, and thus require different configurations of *ethoic* appeals.

"How," Hartelius wonders, "does the rhetoric of expertise in virtual spaces negotiate the tension between care and not-care, or goodwill and objectivity?" (2019, 132). Segal and Richardson have noted that "when science speaks, it speaks through scientists" and that "the credibility of an individual scientist is enhanced by his or her status as a scientist—that is, by his or her ability to speak with the institutional sanction of science" (2003, 139). Even in the public sphere scientists are granted some *ethotic* qualities by way of their title as "scientist," but the anecdote from the March for Science AMA reveals that such default *ethos* can easily be challenged by complex interactions between platform affordances and content which articulate a rhetoric of expertise that demands an accounting of platform affordances as well as traditional conceptions of *ethos*.

To return to the question about whether the underlying affordances work for other experts, and whether they might work in "subreddits with no obvious connection to expertise" (Hartelius 2019, 131), let me submit a brief case study. While the algorithmic logic underlying every subreddit remains the same, the context shaping the reception of an individual's expert-performance is different and the grounds for adjudication are expressed through the rules for each subreddit.

Take, for example, a popular subreddit that does not obviously recruit experts: r/nosleep. r/nosleep "is a subreddit for realistic horror stories" and there are rules for what kind of stories can be submitted, as well as how redditor's are allowed to respond to those stories in the comments section. A perceived "expert" in r/nosleep might be a successful author writing in the horror genre as evidenced by stories that are highly upvoted and the accrual of karma from submitted posts in the subreddit—*ethos* here is reliant on curating a Reddit-exclusive reputation inclusive of goodwill towards audience and an ethical relationship within the norms of the community. Moreover, there is no equivalent "flair" found in r/nosleep that denotes an author's "expertise," nor can authors solicit their work like the hyperlinking-happy scientists in r/science. In addition, the appreciation of a "good horror story" is more subjective than the perceived objectivity of empirical science and thus, what is upvoted and downvoted in this subreddit is largely dependent on creative qualities and, thus, differently implicate conceptions of expert performance. So, on the question of whether the architectural affordances that we identified work the same way for other experts as for scientists, the answer is largely "no," as you'll find in every subreddit unique ways of judging what is considered to be quality contributions by credible contributors.

An Important Contribution to Science Communication

The reliance of AMA series on unique Reddit and r/science-specific *ethos*-assessment heuristics signals that it might just be a novel science communication genre. Since the cancellation of the series in May 2018, r/science has since introduced its replacement, the Science Discussion Series. Science Discussion Series installments are hosted monthly and are always "led by a team of scientists so that [redditors] can hear multiple expert perspectives and answer many more questions" (p1percub 2018). How expertise might be performed on the same digital platform with the same architectural affordances, but with temporal limitations and a multiplicity of expert-participants/hosts, requires careful analysis to explore

how the expression and quality of the *ethos*-assessment heuristics we originally identified might evolve.

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