Around 950 Words

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Technical Winking, Journalistic Integrity, Attention Economy

Michelle Gibbons proposes Persona 4.0 as an alteration of Charles Morris' Fourth Persona, with its revised name a nod to tech and software updates. In Persona 4.0, instead of a human audience, it is the machine that recognizes covert "winks," meant to stay undiscovered by the larger audience, the "dupes" (53). The Fourth Persona is an "invisible audience the text invokes indirectly, via specific textual markers intended for that audience only and designed to elude notice by others" (53). These indirect textual markers are "winks" that can be explained away, that have dual meanings, that are not obvious markers but markers that are recognizable by a distinct audience.

In Persona 4.0, the winks are keywords that pander to tools like Search Engine Optimization, Topical Optimization, and various algorithms: benign to human audiences, simply part of the content, but dual-purposed to increase site traffic. Gibbons reaches for Richard Lanham's concept of an "attention economy" to explain the need for Persona 4.0. Lanham argues that rhetoric "might as well have been called 'the economics of attention'" (89) as rhetorical tools steer audiences, and their attention, towards or away from various texts. The internet with its currency of clicks and keystrokes relies upon these tools for payment.

Journalism is an obvious area where Persona 4.0 plays an important role both in the attention economy and the argument around journalistic integrity. If we assume that journalists should aim for non-interested pieces that spread objective information to be moral and full of

integrity, the essential inclusion of Persona 4.0 into their pieces jeopardizes their integrity. Journalists must wink to the machine to disseminate their pieces, many of which spread important information that should be disseminated from a moral standpoint. Yet they are forced to pander to a non-human audience and must alter their writing to be fiscally successful in the attention economy.

The Economist has just recently put out an article titled “How ‘judge-mandering’ is eroding trust in America’s judiciary” and is full of examples of Persona 4.0. “Judge-mandering” is a fairly new term related to “gerrymandering” and is when partisan lawyers search out judges ideologically sympathetic to their case, in this situation ending in consequences across the nation (para 2). This term, along with “judge(s),” “court(s),” “judiciary,” and “problem” have been repeated throughout the piece over four times each, the first three being repeated six to ten times in this less than six-hundred-word article. Also repeated are the words “political,” “law,” “partisan,” and “Kacsmaryk,” the last being the name of the judge in charge of the case that sparked the article: the banning of the abortion pill nationwide. However, this repetition is more than catchy journalism and uses SEO to wink to Persona 4.0. These key terms are included at the start of each paragraph in the article: without subheadings here is where the machine can take notice of the terms and place the article higher up in results when users search any of those words.

However, fighting for the fiscal success of a piece does not compromise the journalistic integrity of the piece. Newspapers have always been sold, and the style of the pieces has always been a selling point across different brands and corporations. The prestige of the company was, and still is, another selling point, but a journalist aiming to write in a specific field is free to choose a prestigious company within that field and one does not consider them without integrity

(excepting certain companies with problems beyond the scope of this paper). It is practical to consider how to sell the article while writing it: no one can read it, after all, if it is not disseminated. What difference does winking to the machine, to Persona 4.0, within an article signify when compared to other rhetorical techniques meant to draw the attention of the reader?

Persona 4.0 does not necessarily have ill effects on journalistic integrity, but it is a new factor that must now be considered when analyzing pieces for that element. Today, there is a lot of unease and fear surrounding the machine, like artificial intelligence and even the humble search engine, when concerns of agency enter the conversation. Gibbons acknowledges that "in the case of the search engine, critically oriented work addresses the problematic nature of some of its determinations, as in Safiya Umoja Noble's work on the search engine's return of discriminatory results, driving our eyeballs in ways we should clearly resist" (52). If the algorithm and search engines are inherently problematic, is appealing to them equally as problematic? Or, can it be liberatory as those discriminated against learn the systems at work and maneuver themselves out of discrimination? Gibbons says that "Persona 4.0 illustrates the complex and constantly negotiated, iterative interplay between human and machine" (65). This constant negotiation is of most interest to me, as it acknowledges the wide range of possibilities always present in the interactions between machine and human. There is always a negotiation, an exchange of power, information, and more, and it is at this moment agency is decided.

Agency is always in a position of doubt, and its existence can usually be argued for or against. This is an issue that arises in many fields: feminism, for one, poses questions surrounding makeup, homemaking, and job-hunting. Agency is a chicken-and-egg question that I will not try to answer completely. Rather, I will say that winking is another rhetorical device meant to covertly signal to a new agent we have all just been made aware of, and its

consequences in journalism may require its justifications to support the author's agency and integrity to the more cynical or conservative reader.