

EMERGENT ARGUMENTS: DIGITAL MEDIA
AND SOCIAL ARGUMENTATION

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation proposes a new framework for understanding how argumentation and rhetorical action unfold in digital space. While studies in the field of rhetorical theory often address new discursive practices in spaces like Twitter and Facebook, they do not always assess the ways that the platforms themselves can influence the forms and conventions of argumentation. Similarly, the field of new media studies has attended to the structural and technical components of digital platforms, but rarely views these details through a rhetorical lens. Thus, this dissertation combines the two disciplines by approaching its thesis from two angles. First, it employs major scholarly and theoretical work from the field of rhetorical studies to determine the ways in which digital rhetorical practices align with or differ from previous ones. Second, it combines new media scholarship with close readings of digital texts, in order to examine how argumentation functions across different media platforms. This interdisciplinary approach provides unique insight into the ways that media platforms and rhetorical practices coevolve.

The dissertation's central term, "emergent arguments," marks an epistemological shift away from the idea that an argument resides within a single text or narrative. Instead, arguments emerge from sustained and engaged interactions with digital

communities, from explorations of hyperlinked trails of information, from patterns of images, words, and datasets. In digital space, knowledge is constructed communally, meaning that argumentation takes place in collaboration with a community. The project follows closely with the work of Aristotle and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, where argumentation is an inherently social act driven by cultural context and shared knowledge. The dissertation builds upon this premise by claiming that digital media make this sociality visible, traceable, and more dynamic than previous communicative platforms. It ultimately argues that in digital space, meaning itself is social, intertextual, and multimodal.

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CHAPTER I

EMERGENT ARGUMENTS: DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL ARGUMENTATION

“We are in the midst of a generational shift in cognitive modes.”

--Kate Hayles, *How We Think*

In early January 2016, the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic broke into the public consciousness by way of a trend on Twitter. Long before it transformed into a hashtag, the phrase appeared on a popular tee-shirt designed by activist CaShawn Thompson (Viera n.p.). From there, it quickly became a source of affirmation and empowerment for Black women, a rallying call for the celebration of Black female identities. As Figures A and B below suggest, #BlackGirlMagic (#BGM) is a mode of self-acceptance, of embracing one’s identity even if it does not fit within societal standards. The movement creates a space for Black women to celebrate and affirm one another, to create “authentic sisterhood” in a culture that does not always acknowledge or accept Black femininity (“Freedom of Speech” n.p.). According to Bene Viera, writer for *Essence* magazine, #BlackGirlMagic expresses “that shared connection between a group of women who have never met yet deeply understand the Black girl experience” (n.p.). #BlackGirlMagic reaches across time and space to create community based on shared experience and mutual negotiation of identity.

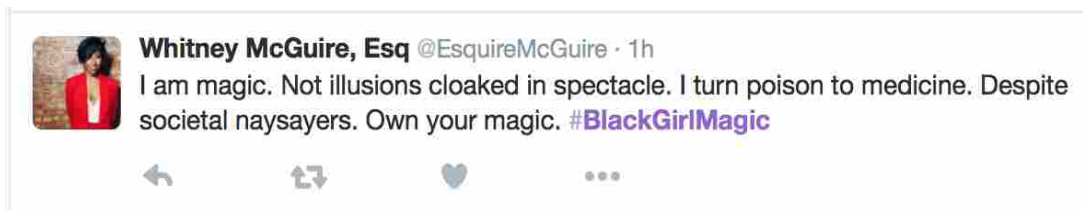


Figure A



Figure B

Twitter users have continued to popularize the term, transforming it from a casual expression of solidarity between Black women to a pop-culture movement with a presence in mass media and public discourse. In its February 2016 issue, the magazine *Essence* featured the “#BlackGirlMagic Class of 2016” on its cover, both to commemorate Black History Month and to honor the important roles of Black women in arts, culture, and social activism. The magazine effectively combines the power of the burgeoning #BlackGirlMagic movement with a culturally familiar celebration of Black history, increasing its valence among people who may never have encountered the term and joining #BlackGirlMagic with a nationwide project of increasing awareness and appreciation of Black culture. This mass media boom in the visibility of the #BGM movement suggests that functions like Twitter hashtags enable communities outside the mainstream to promote their causes through grassroots efforts.

While this increased visibility is important and positive, the tweets produced by Black women’s communities remain the driving force behind the movement. A quick visit to the “Live” feed of tweets posted under #BlackGirlMagic provides a more dynamic view of what the movement can mean and do. At the time of this writing, Black women from across the nation are tweeting about their lives, their identities, and their culture by way of #BlackGirlMagic. For instance, on January 26, 2016, Twitter users

posted over one hundred messages tagged under #BlackGirlMagic, on topics ranging from art to fashion to celebrity culture to education (#BlackGirlMagic “Twitter Search” n.p.) From celebrating Serena Williams’ recent achievements in tennis, to posting photos of magazine racks filled with cover photos of Black women, to linking to young Marley Dias’s call for #1000BlackGirlBooks in school curricula: #BGM recognizes the diversity of ways that Black women shape all aspects of culture in America and beyond (“Angel Payne,” “Jason Waterfalls,” “Ronaye” n.p.). In doing so, the hashtag also presents a dynamic, communally-negotiated definition of what #BlackGirlMagic can mean, both to a larger group and to the individuals comprising it.

#BlackGirlMagic, and countless hashtags like it, create a place for counterpublics to define and express themselves. In other words, movements like #BGM carve out space for those groups that may not always fit with the standards established by mainstream publics. This hashtag began as a concerted effort to celebrate women of color, since the popular media so rarely does. #BGM originated with Thompson’s teeshirt design, but as people began to discover it through Twitter and other social media, they contributed to its meaning by interpreting and applying the term in unique ways. By the time the mass media began to cover the term, it had transformed from a catchy slogan to a complex social justice project enriched by the varied set of cultural associations attached to it by way of the hashtag. Similarly to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, #BGM has evolved into a distinct yet multifaceted activist project, emerging from the shared goals of a diverse yet singularly focused community. Indeed, the way that #BlackGirlMagic proliferates and evolves, across communities and between media platforms, is

representative of the ways that ideas and information spread in the digital ecology at large.

This dissertation, titled “Emergent Arguments: Digital Media and Social Argumentation,” tracks movements like #BlackGirlMagic in order to propose a new framework for understanding how rhetorical action operates in digital space. Its central claim is that the social and intertextual conditions of digital discourse create what I call “emergent arguments.”ⁱ An emergent argument has three key characteristics. First, it represents the general consensus of a discourse community, bringing together multiple expressions of a shared premise or set of premises into a coherent whole. Second, the emergent argument is partly a product of the reader’s interpretation: the process of networked reading, combined with the reader’s own interpretive lens, lends the emergent argument its shape. Third, it is an expression of decentralized yet collective discourse, making emergent argumentation especially effective in the rhetoric of counterpublics. Unlike other more formal argumentative modes, the goal of emergent argumentation is not to persuade a reader of a particular claim, but rather for the reader to recognize the community’s mutually negotiated consensus on a given issue. This shift from claim to consensus is a fundamental component of emergent argumentation.

Thus, the dissertation demonstrates that emergent arguments, articulated through the collective reasoning of authors and readers, coalesce through trends and patterns. They arise in tandem with sustained and engaged interactions with digital communities and audiences, manifesting themselves as patterns or networks. Sociality is embedded into the very fabric of emergent argumentation, so that reasoning is profoundly collaborative and meaning itself depends upon collective agreement. Overall, I view

emergent argumentation as a strategic response to a rhetorical environment that is chaotic yet patterned, impressionistic yet analytic, kinetic yet structurally coherent.

An emergent argument is the sum of the parts of a discourse, but it is also more than that. It is the overall message arising from the ideas and voices that comprise a discourse, which readers and arguers come to understand through sustained engagement with a discourse community. For example, when a reader explores a series of hyperlinked articles on a particular issue, she can read each article independently but can also recognize the larger contours of the dialogue surrounding that issue. She can also begin to detect the stakes that make the argument important. This is why the emergent argument is more than the sum of its parts: it does not simply consist of reading a series of articles or exploring the tweets filed under a particular hashtag, but of interpreting the larger field of interests, goals, and values that motivate them. This means that the reader's interpretation does not simply render the argument visible, but becomes *part* of the argument itself. Her view of the discourse is influenced by the path she chooses to take through a set of linked articles or her position within a network of ideas on Twitter or Tumblr. Thus, the emergent argument depends entirely upon the lens through which the reader views it.

In many ways, emergent argumentation builds upon key aspects of previous rhetorical models. Audiences have always had to understand a discourse as more than the sum of its parts to gain insight into its higher goals and underlying value systems. Likewise, reader-response criticism tells us that the meaning of the written work has always been subject to the reader's interpretation. Yet emergent argument differs from these models in significant ways. Indeed, emergent argumentation is the unique product of the digital discursive environment. This is because the digital environment allows for

an unprecedented level of simultaneity between voices, ideas, and argumentative positions. The dynamism of a live Twitter or Facebook feed presents a multivocality that print texts simply cannot replicate; it is as if everyone in a room is speaking at once, yet a coherent message can still emerge from the din. There is an immediacy and a kinetics to the way that the digital environment presents its information, creating a discursive model that is collaborative, exploratory, and socially grounded.

An important contention, and one that this dissertation takes seriously, is that emergent argument (and digital argumentation in general) is not substantially different from argumentative modes of the past. For example, social justice projects have always arisen through the grassroots labors of invested individuals, without the aid of Twitter or other digital applications. Humans have always used technology to extend the ability to communicate and complete tasks; thus we should not overstate the importance of the technologies themselves in accounting for the ways that people interact with information and each other. Yet I would maintain that those technological “extensions,” as Marshall McLuhan has called them, cannot be extricated from the discursive practices which they have been designed to improve. Platforms like Twitter have been purposefully designed, by human minds, to enhance particular aspects of communication and community building. These design choices are deeply rhetorical ones.

While it is clearly true that dialogic and community-based rhetorical action are not new phenomena, it remains important to examine the changes in communicative practices that arise when we combine human technological innovation with preexisting discursive modes. To this end, the dissertation aims to provide an analysis of how digital communication functions and what impacts it has on rhetorical theory as we currently

understand it. It attempts to theorize the rhetorical work that happens on social networks and discussion boards, to give a name to the ways that people combine long-standing discursive practices with newer communicative technologies and argumentative modes. The project investigates how new media platforms and rhetorical practices coevolve, producing important adaptations to the structure, form, and praxis of argumentation.

This concept of coevolution is at the core of the dissertation's claims. Kate Hayles, in her book *How We Think*, uses the term *technogenesis* to describe this ongoing evolution. Coined by Bernard Stiegler, this term refers to the "idea that humans and technics have coevolved together" (Hayles 10). As with any other tool, from the hammer to the pencil to the electric light switch, communicative technologies evolve in tandem with their human users. This distinction is important because it highlights the reciprocal relationship between people and technology. Humans create technology, but their practices and modes of thinking are also changed by the tools they use every day. Technogenesis is, in the context of this project, a response to attitudes of technological determinism, which suggests that technologies drive societal evolution. While we certainly cannot attribute social change to our technologies, we must also avoid the assumption that social or historical shifts drive technological development. Technogenesis is a way of recognizing that technology and society drive one another, and that changes in one occur in connection to changes in the other.

Technogenesis is important for this project for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it represents a move away from the positive/negative framework that is so often imposed upon discussions of communicative technology. Claiming that technology can be either good or bad does not account for the full complexity of the relationship between humans

and technologies, assuming that a technology's characteristics *shape* human behaviors rather than assisting, extending, or otherwise *combining* with existing human practices. Another integral point from Hayles' work is that technogenesis is "not about progress," but about adaptation (81). Assuming that technologies or human societies always move forward imposes a false narrative on a process that is in actuality decentered and fragmented, with no single result or endpoint. Secondly, technogenesis also applies to human discourse: we use the tools of social networks and digital messaging to extend and expand communicative practices in place prior to the advent of the internet, but in doing so we also adapt those practices to meet new possibilities and create different relationships with information and with one another. The human relationship to communicative technologies is thus dialogic, each complicating and extending the other.

Relationships between people and their rhetorical practices are also dialogic, also technogenetic in a way. Rhetorical practices are also tools that change and adapt given needs and circumstances. Some rhetorical models become more efficient in a digital environment, while others fall away. For instance, while digital argumentation continues to rely on core rhetorical principles such as *kairos* and amplification, it also resists aspects of the rhetorical tradition in its insistence on fragmentation and databased information structures. It would appear that while the key components of argumentation remain—logical reasoning through evidence, careful attention to audience, and ethical consideration of multiple perspectives—the overall shape of argumentation has changed.

One of the major goals of this project is to see how rhetorical practices coevolve with communicative technologies, identifying overarching trends that rhetorical scholars should take into account when analyzing public discourse. To this end, each chapter takes

up a particular communicative platform, from social networks to discussion boards to online publications, analyzing its standards and conventions for discourse.

Methodologically, examining so many different platforms may seem too broad or diffuse an approach. Yet I found it integral to take a wide view of digital discourse, to be able to see the entire scope of these changes. While each platform has its own discursive standards, its own set of innovations combined with familiar conventions, looking at this diverse array of platforms reveals patterns and overall trends in communicative practices. If it is true that “we are in the midst of a generational shift in cognitive modes,” as Kate Hayles suggests, we need to be able to characterize that shift, to understand how it differs from previous cognitive and communicative modes. Emergent argumentation is one way to characterize that shift. As Chapter Three explains in depth, emergent arguments arise from the move away from linear methods of organizing information and toward a networked approach. Although discursive approaches may differ across platforms, they all exhibit this turn toward networked reasoning and communal negotiation of knowledge. These factors represent the latest manifestations of the ongoing interaction between humans, their technologies, and their rhetorical practices.

The concept of technogenesis hearkens to Walter Ong’s theoretical work on orality and literacy. Ong’s work seeks to characterize the “shift in cognitive modes” represented by the move from oral to print-based communication. Two of Ong’s terms are particularly relevant to this discussion: secondary orality and residual orality. While primary orality refers to pre-literate cultures relying solely on oral discourse, secondary orality represents a newer phrase of literacy that exhibits important similarities to primary orality, yet is completely contingent upon writing technologies and the existence of

alphabetic print. Arising from electronic media such as television, radio, and print texts, secondary orality is “a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well” (*Orality and Literacy* 136). Ong points out that television, radio, and other auditory media “[generates] a strong group sense” similar to the social group mentality that results from oral communication (136). Hearing the spoken word, whether in person or via electronic media, turns the entire group of listeners into a single audience. But in secondary orality, “we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically,” rather than by default (136). Literacy presents the option of orienting toward the self instead of toward the group. With literacy, one can sit alone and silently read a text, rather than joining an audience to hear an orator or engage in dialogue with others. Thus the move back to the group, which follows with the advent of auditory technologies like television, represents a conscious choice that is possible only once a culture has internalized literacy. This is partly because electronic technologies require literate engineers and operators, as Ong explains above. It is also because literate societies have embedded writing technologies deeply enough into their cultural systems, so that they can recognize the effects of communicative mediums and make deliberate choices based upon that knowledge.

Despite its emphasis on the distinctions between primary orality, literacy, and secondary orality, Ong’s work does not imply that new mediums or discursive practices erase older ones. Rather, they build upon and combine with one another.ⁱⁱ Ong uses the term “residual orality” to describe how the remnants of orality remain in a newly-literate culture. Oral residues are “habits of thought and expression tracing back to

preliterate situations or practice, or deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture” (*Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* 25-26). The reliance on mnemonics rather than written records might be one example of an oral residual in a print culture. These residuals should not be confused with secondary orality, however. Residuals are “habits of mind” that are “seldom conscious at all,” while secondary orality is necessarily conscious, for reasons explained above (26). Returning to oral practices through habit is not the same as making a conscious decision to emphasize the oral in a culture where print literacy already exists.

Indeed, secondary orality is a very different kind of orality than its primary counterpart, even if it highlights the social and human experience of being an audience. Secondary orality also has important similarities to print literacy. In an analysis of public oration in the era of television and radio, Ong shows that while secondary orality harkens back to oral culture, it is clearly seated in the traditions established by print. Using the example of televised debates as opposed to debates witnessed solely by those in attendance, Ong argues that “despite their cultivated air of spontaneity, these media are totally dominated by a sense of closure which is the heritage of print: a show of hostility might break open the closure, the tight control” (*Orality* 137). The televised debate is in other words a staged orality, one that references the conventions of orality but maintains much stricter “control” over the content and the outcome. This is partially because, as with print texts, “the audience is absent, invisible, inaudible” because the primary purpose of the staged debate is for broadcast (137). Print texts wield this same level of control and predictability, since they too are prepared with a remote audience in mind. For Ong, “print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has

been finalized, has reached a state of completion” (132). These qualities of writing, and their echoes in secondary orality, are the precise qualities that so concerned Plato at the time of writing’s advent: that it is deadened by its incapacity to speak back to its audience and that its prescriptive content precludes all the spontaneity and intellectual possibility of face-to-face dialogue.ⁱⁱⁱ

While many of the tenets of Ong’s secondary orality hold true in this digital age, it also seems that we have moved into yet another stage of the relationship between orality, print media, and writing technologies. I propose that the era of digital communicative technologies represents a “tertiary orality” that brings us even closer to orality in some ways, yet relies even more heavily on literacy than its secondary counterpart. On comment sections, discussion boards, and Twitter feeds, messages appear immediately, so that interactions become conversational and spontaneous, so much like speech. Yet the “speakers” remain physically remote from one another, which allows each participant to calculate and revise their written responses more thoroughly than would be possible in spoken exchange. Again we see the interplay between alphabetic literacy and orality: in digital communication, speakers draw upon the socially grounded and dynamic nature of speech, yet they do so by way of deeply entrenched literacy practices and reliance on writing technologies.

Emergent argumentation is one component of this “tertiary orality.” Like secondary orality, tertiary orality rests on the deep cultural resonances of alphabetic literacy, but it uses written text to create intimate dialogic connections between people in real time. The digital platforms discussed in this dissertation contain mostly written and visual media, yet they create an immediacy, a social closeness, and a de-centeredness that

arguably resembles primary orality even more closely than the auditory cultural products of secondary orality. Digital platforms eliminate secondary orality's distance between speaker and audience, yet they also leave a unique written record of interactions between people. Digital interactions on places like Twitter unfold similarly to spoken conversations in that they are spontaneous, short, and often dialogic. The emergent argument is the product of these discursive conditions: it presents a widely varied set of interpretations that arises from sustained yet spontaneous interaction between the members of a community.

Much of the discourse of the internet, and indeed much of discourse at large, manifests as “sustained yet spontaneous interaction” between communities with shared interests and goals. This dissertation considers these communities “publics,” as defined by Michael Warner in his 2002 book *Publics and Counterpublics*. For Warner, the ongoing exchange of ideas and texts creates “social worlds” among those people involved in the exchange (11-12). The internet contains countless publics that coexist and interact. From fandoms to followers of political blogs, from Twitter networks to the news media: all of these are examples of publics that circulate information in a certain way based on the knowledge and goals of the constituency. These “social worlds” coalesce around mutual interests and worldviews, and they exist only in relationship to “the rhetoric through which it is imagined” (12, 67). Indeed, the public is an “imagined” space that at once produces rhetoric and *is* rhetoric; it relies entirely on its own particular modes of address to maintain its status as a public. Thus we might see the formation of publics itself as an emergent process—a public arises out of ongoing discursive exchange, and it is only recognizable through the shared values and conventions that define it.

Emergent argumentation resonates even more strongly in the discourse of what Warner calls counterpublics. Some publics use this socially grounded, decentralized form of argumentation to make claims that may not have a place within the mainstream. According to Warner, “some publics are defined by their tensions with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general” (56). #BlackGirlMagic, for example, reveals a counterpublic in action: this cultural group responds to the lack of positive representation of its constituency in the larger public of pop culture and news media by creating a space for celebration and joyful acknowledgment. The very need for this kind of acknowledgement establishes its relationship to its “tensions with a larger public.” We might see emergent arguments as “grassroots,” or “organic,” even though the popular media can also tap into the momentum that builds up around trending topics that originate with counterpublics (such as #BGM). As Warner points out, “a counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relationship to power” (56). Movements like #BGM or feminist communities on Reddit function both within and outside larger publics; both have a “critical relationship” to the power of the medium enabling their existence (in these cases, Twitter, Reddit, and the popular media in general). Both of these communities run counter to norms established by larger publics. They do this by generating energy and visibility around their causes—#BGM through its hashtag, and Reddit feminists through the creation of /r/AskFeminists.^{iv} In other words, emergent argumentation is particularly well-suited to the needs of counterpublics, because it allows

momentum to build around the multiplicity of voices rising together to address an issue of mutual concern.

Clearly members of a counterpublic can use emergent argumentation to reach assent, as the example above attests. One might ask, however, whether emergent argumentation generates productive dissent as well. As we will see in Chapter Three, some media scholars contend that the internet allows people to seek out only those sources and communities that reaffirm the beliefs they already hold (Turow and Tsui 4). This certainly holds true in some aspects of the mass media: conservative readers might gravitate toward FOX News while a left-leaning readership might visit Al Jazeera or MSNBC. Some people may choose to join communities where their beliefs are never challenged and their shared assumptions never explicated or examined. The internet, with all its highly specific publics and counterpublics, surely contains what Patricia Roberts-Miller has called “enclaves,” or communities that interact only with people and ideas that reaffirm their own values and systems of belief (41). This problem exists in all realms of discourse, and indeed anywhere in which participants avoid circumstances in which their beliefs might be challenged. This is also a concern for emergent argumentation: in an argumentative system which reveals claims gradually through the contributions of multiple voices, is it possible for expressions of dissent to become visible, even within an abundance of assent?

I believe that it is possible, and indeed that it is part of the dynamic nature of emergent argumentation to respond and react continually to declarations of dissent. As the above example demonstrates, emergent arguments can both produce and respond to dissenting opinions. The #BlackGirlMagic movement, while itself an act of dissent

against biased media standards, must also respond to charges levied directly against the core principles behind the hashtag. One example is a piece published by *Elle* magazine's Linda Chavers, titled "Here's My Problem with #BlackGirlMagic." It is important to note that the piece was published by *Elle* magazine, the world's top-selling fashion magazine and bastion of white standards of beauty, in response to the *Essence* #BGM cover ("Elle," n.p.). Even in the context of popular print publications, it is possible to view *Elle* as representative of a public to which *Essence* might run counter. The piece argues that #BGM reaffirms stereotypes of Black women as strong and tireless in the face of unending struggle. Chavers also claims that #BGM dehumanizes women by characterizing them as supernatural, as something other than purely human (n.p.). #BGM proponents responded by articulating a definition of the movement in relationship to, but independent from, the content of Chavers' critique, essentially arguing that the article misses the point of the movement entirely.^v In the end, the criticism only served to make the movement stronger, as it prompted an effort to define, clarify, and defend the purposes behind #BlackGirlMagic. The Chavers article shows how a grassroots community, albeit one that has expanded into the popular media, must be able to defend its cause against the dissent of a larger public.

Indeed, the very claim that counterpublics use emergent argumentation necessarily implies that emergent argumentation is capable of generating and replying to dissent. This is because counterpublics, by their very nature, exist in relationship with and in contrast to the larger publics from which they set themselves apart. As Michael Warner notes, counterpublics "[maintain] at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (56). Although the word "subordinate" feels somewhat like a

mischaracterization of counterpublics, it is true that mainstream publics often force “rogue” discourses into subordinate positions. Counterpublics arise because there is no place for their discourse in any other public forum. In short, their very existence is a form of dissent.

Each chapter of the dissertation unpacks a key component of emergent argumentation, using case studies to show how counterpublics create discursive environments that work reciprocally with their chosen digital platforms. Chapter One, “‘Lurk Moar:’ The Social Formation of Audience in Digital Discourse,” examines the role of audience in the rhetoric of emergent argumentation, examining how meaningful discourse communities form even within the relative constraints of anonymity. Set against the backdrop of Warner’s work on publics and counterpublics, the chapter combines a study of universal audience as presented in *The New Rhetoric* with close readings of arguments in three web communities. This shows not only that the treatment of audience shifts depending on the structure of the website, but also that counterpublics use an emergent sense of audience to identify shared goals and assumptions, even within larger digital communities that may be antagonistic to their cause. As the chapter shows, these communities make audience membership a prerequisite for argumentation, so that the successful claim or appeal must be grounded in an intimate knowledge of the community’s goals and discursive conventions.

Chapter One surveys a set of three digital platforms, each of which lays out a different standard for authorship and participation. Looking at all three configurations allows me to demonstrate how gradations of autonomy can shape discourse, as well as to show that digital communities are more likely to thrive when interlocutors participate as

both authors and audience members. The first platform, *The New York Times* website, melds formal journalistic pieces with more casual blogs, most of which the reader can comment upon. This site retains a more traditional view of author and audience, yet demonstrates how the commenting can grant the audience more authority than they might have in other rhetorical situations (though it may not encourage the formation of counterpublics). The second, *Daily Kos*, is a political blog where the roles of author and audience begin to blend, and where perspectives outside the mainstream can carry more weight and momentum than on *The New York Times*. Users on this site write “diaries” and accrue authority by composing effective comments and receiving recommendations from fellow users. Here, the audience transforms into an autonomous set of interlocutors geared toward similar political goals.

The third platform, *Reddit*, describes itself as “a type of online community where users vote on content” (“About” n.p.). *Reddit* is radically devoted to community—users, or “redditors,” can “upvote” comments or posts, so that the community, rather than moderators or editors, determine visibility of information. Here, audience and author are nearly indistinguishable. Yet *Reddit* as a larger entity comprises a coherent public with political associations that sometimes run counter to the positions of the smaller communities, or “subreddits” housed within it. I conduct a close reading of one such subreddit to show how counterpublics can uphold their own standards for discourse even in the face of pressure from an antagonistic public, working both within and outside the constraints established by that larger public and by the platform itself. My ultimate argument in this chapter is that the formation of audience in a digital environment is an

ongoing and emergent process wherein audiences and authors perpetually constitute each other, exchanging roles and practicing a self-reflexive form of rhetorical agency.

Chapter Two, “The Rhetoric of Sharing: Facebook, Argumentation, and the Remediation of the Social,” builds from the previous chapter’s assertion that creating successful arguments is a social process, suggesting that people use digital media, even more so than previous writing technologies, to construct meaning socially. This portion of the project works to define “sociality” within the context of social networking sites (SNS), exploring how that term can take on different meanings in the digital realm as opposed to the embodied world of sociality and friendship. In doing so, it lays important groundwork for understanding how emergent arguments work, looking at how such factors as time-sensitivity, social status, and SNS algorithms determine which posts are effective (or indeed even visible). This chapter also marks an important turn from digital platforms that connect people anonymously based on shared interests, like those examined in the first chapter, toward networks that connect people to others they already know from their daily interactions. As Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison have noted, “Social network sites reconfigured people’s engagement with online communities because they signaled a shift from interest-driven to friendship-driven spaces” (“Sociality” 154). This means not only that audience functions differently in settings where interlocutors know each other outside the digital realm, but also that people who use social networks begin to see the acts of producing and exchanging knowledge in a new way.

To elucidate this, the second chapter examines the ubiquitous social networking site Facebook in order to claim that in a digital environment, sociality is embedded into

the very way we gather information, make arguments, and form concepts of self. The chapter identifies “sharing” as the primary rhetorical mode on the SNS. This socially grounded mechanism of information exchange operates on an understanding of meaning as constructed via patterns of social activity. Through close readings of argumentative exchanges on Facebook, I show how sharing, as opposed to other argumentative models such as persuasion, has the capacity to create a rhetorical environment focused on social context and interpersonal sensitivity rather than agonistic debate. This kind of rhetorical environment is a prerequisite for emergent argumentation, because it necessitates a deeper understanding of social context and views knowledge as culturally contingent and mutually negotiated.

In spite of its optimistic conclusions about sharing as a rhetorical model, this chapter also confronts the corporatization of social media, retaining critical awareness that corporate entities like Facebook and Google capitalize on the dynamic of social connectivity (van Dijck). No technology is separate from the corporate interests that fund it; information that may appear neutral is displayed based on algorithms designed to generate profits. My argument grants agency to the human users of technology, while simultaneously recognizing that technological process filter interactions with social media. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the intervention of corporate interests does not delegitimize the social ethos of digital media, and that users find ways of “hacking” social media to suit their purposes and enables productive rhetorical action.

The dissertation’s third chapter, “Emergent Arguments: Networked Reading and Communal Reasoning,” explicates the role of database, pattern, and networked reading practices in emergent argumentation. The third chapter crystalizes the concept of

emergent argument by investigating the inventive aspects of networked reading and examining a Twitter hashtag to show that arguments coalesce around trends and patterns in digital space. After having surveyed the roles of audience and sociality in the digital rhetorical environment in the previous two chapters, this portion of the project turns toward digital reading and writing practices themselves. In doing so, the chapter provides a clearer picture of what emergent arguments look like, how interlocutors work together to generate them, and how readers discern them. Using the work of Kate Hayles, I demonstrate how readers process appeals while engaging with multiple texts, as when reading a set of hyperlinked articles. This chapter also confronts some of the major counterarguments to the dissertation's optimistic claims about the value of networked reading and digital writing practices. I assess the work of scholars like Nicholas Carr to account for the impact that digital literacy can have upon human cognition.

The third chapter proposes a new model for understanding the shape that argumentation can take in digital space. It claims that arguments can emerge from multiple interrelated images or ideas that are connected, but may not provide any framework or lens to show why and how the ideas belong together. For instance, the “hashtag” function allows Twitter users to categorize posts, but the connection between the post and the category is not always self-explanatory. While scrolling through images related to #feminism may seem like merely glancing over a catalogue of semi-related images, contours of meaning begin to emerge, so that the reader gains a multifaceted and individualized interpretation of what feminism can mean. The chapter also claims that readers themselves create arguments in the act of drawing meaning from sets of images,

finding unique connections and sharing them with the discourse community of fellow readers.

To examine these two ways that arguments emerge online, Chapter Three performs two readings. The first examines a small set of hyperlinked articles, blog posts, and tweets related to a particularly contentious episode of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. This reading shows that online discourse relies on intertextuality to generate arguments, and that hyperlinked reading practices reveal larger patterns within the discourse surrounding an issue. The chapter also conducts a reading of a hashtag, #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter. I suggest that this hashtag, and countless others like it, makes a rigorous argument not by stating it in so many words, but by playing upon shared cultural knowledge and an excess of information in an appeal to amplification. This hashtag, which was reappropriated by the Black community on Twitter, shows how a multifaceted cultural group can negotiate meaning communally by subverting an initially racist hashtag and employing it as a source of empowerment. This reading also supplies further evidence for the claim that counterpublics use emergent argumentation to create space for their discourse amid inimical rhetorical circumstances.

The fourth chapter, titled “Composition Pedagogy and Yik Yak as an Inventive Site,” assesses the implications of emergent argumentation upon the teaching of writing. In this final chapter I claim that writing, thinking, and reading practices have always been multimodal, and that no single mode is extricable from any other. The interrelatedness of literacy practices extends to the writing classroom. Teachers of composition should recognize the connectedness of all the kinds of writing our students do, both within and outside the writing class. Students interface with writing technologies almost constantly;

this creates a rich set of writing contexts that we can draw upon in our teaching. Building from the work of composition scholars such as Christian Weisser, the fourth chapter argues that mobile and digital writing technologies provide an ideal venue to engage with rhetorics of place and to experiment with public writing.

To demonstrate the potential for mobile technologies to enhance composition pedagogy, I perform a reading of the place-based rhetoric of the social media application Yik Yak, suggesting that the field of composition studies should tap into the publics (and counterpublics) that students belong to in their lives outside the classroom. This chapter shows how students use Yik Yak to playfully articulate their identities *as students*, creating semi-public communities based upon the shared experiences of college life (as you can see in the image on the left). I highlight the inventive potential of mobile apps like Yik Yak, pointing toward strategies for how teachers might make use of social applications in the classroom. Overall, the case study reveals how students engage with textual spaces that are at once imagined and grounded in place.

The choice to end with pedagogy is a deliberate one. The current “generational shift in cognitive modes” impacts no one more profoundly than our students. Scholars of composition and rhetoric must remain nimble in our approach not just to the theoretical underpinnings of digital discourse, but also to the ways we guide students in forming effective reading, writing, and thinking practices. To this end, the dissertation offers emergent argumentation as a tool, a theoretical lens that can help us understand the way our students are already writing and reading. Rather than training students to conform to an older argumentative model, we should explore the ways that emergent argumentation can revitalize and enrich previous discursive modes.

Notes:

ⁱ I am not the first to have used the phrase “emergent argument,” though I am using it somewhat differently than it has been used in the past. Marco Rühl, in a 2001 article titled “Emergent vs. Dogmatic Arguing,” uses the term “emergent arguing” to indicate a type of formal argumentation in which “arguers make a co-operative and collaborative problem solving effort to match their communicative backgrounds” (167). On this model, a new argumentative position “emerges” out of a discussion, which makes agreement possible. This usage is different from, but dovetails helpfully with, my definition of emergent argument. For Rühl, a new position emerges which enables agreement based on new criteria. For this dissertation, the entire argument—its stasis, its various positions, its evidence, its counterarguments—emerges out of the collaborative contributions of a community. So while my definition shares Rühl’s emphasis on collaboration, it also extends the scope of emergent argumentation to indicate changes in the entire argumentative process, rather than one phenomenon that can arise in a formal argument.

ⁱⁱ Bolter and Grusin call this transition between newer and older media “remediation.” See Chapter 2 for further details on this concept. (*Remediation* 45).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

^{iv} See Chapter 1 for a detailed description of Reddit’s feminist groups.

^v *The Huffington Post* argued that Chavers’ article “totally misses the mark,” while MSNBC correspondent Janet Mock tweeted that “to be simultaneously copied and erased is our plight. This is why #BlackGirlMagic is vital” (Wilson and Workney, Janet Mock n.p.). Other authors and Twitter users point out that Chavers’ critique takes “magic” much too literally, misreading the phrase to indicate the supernatural when it actually gestures toward the unique qualities that make Black women proud of their identities (Wilson and Workneh n.p.).

CHAPTER II

“LURK MOAR”: THE SOCIAL FORMATION OF AUDIENCE IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

In a post titled “I want to be a feminist...but can’t. Can you help me see why the movement is like this?” *Reddit* user “thorwayfeminism” addresses a community of feminists on a discussion board (or “subreddit”) called /r/AskFeminists. The author of the post wonders why a movement that professes advocacy of equality for both genders rejects assertions of sexism against men, asking “Why is the focus not on how we can improve society for the betterment of both genders instead?” (“I want to be a feminist” n.p.). “Thorwayfeminism” charges the /r/feminism community of banning anyone who speaks of sexism against men from participating on the discussion board, going on to conclude that “for every positive step feminism takes in getting equal rights for females, I see it also do sexist/outlandish/crazy things for no reason” (n.p.). As the title suggests, the author professes to want to be a part of the feminist community, but finds it “morally impossible” due to the purportedly irrational and unfair actions of the movement (n.p.). The post in its essence accuses the community on /r/feminism of hypocrisy in its values and in its discourse: by “thorwayfeminism’s” account, participants on the /r/feminism discussion board refuse to entertain, let alone accept, perspectives that differ from those of the group.

It becomes clear rather quickly that “thorwayfeminism’s” post does not actually attempt to understand the complexities of the feminist movement. Even the poster’s user name directly opposes the author’s purported desire to be able to call him or herself a feminist (even if misspelled). The author gears his/her questions at the

shallowest and most impoverished understanding of feminism, going so far as to link to the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of feminism in a bid to expose the hypocrisy of the movement. It is important to note, however, that this post is addressed to the *Reddit* discussion board (known as “subreddit”) /r/AskFeminism. This is a space that feminists on *Reddit* have dedicated to answering the questions and critiques of those outside the feminist community. While a detailed discussion of feminism on *Reddit* follows in this chapter, here we can observe that “thorwayfeminism’s” post, at its front, meets the expectations of discourse in this particular venue. Thus members of the /r/AskFeminism community provide thorough answers, even if the question looks suspiciously like an instance of trolling.

The comments section following the “I want to be a feminist” post hosts a thorough discussion of the tenets of feminism that vastly surpasses the original post in complexity, intellectual rigor, and willingness to entertain multiple perspectives. The commenters clarify that feminism is a multivalent and intersectional movement that cannot be said to comprise a “coherent and unified group” (n.p.). The comments also point out the flaws in the original post’s argumentation, recognizing an inherent flaw in its claims about the nature of feminism. The *Reddit* user (“Redditor”) “kage-e” remarks that most of the original post appears “to be directed at straw-feminists” rather than a complete understanding of the movement(s). But at its core, the discussion in the comments defends the right of /r/feminism to host discourse that builds from shared premises and argues from shared values: “/r/feminism is a sub for feminists and therefore it seems very reasonable that a feminist viewpoint and feminist terminology is presupposed” (n.p.). This comment highlights the social nature of argumentation: a claim

is true only when all interlocutors share the value systems and interpretive conventions that arise from social context.

A particularly striking moment occurs at the end of the discussion thread. Redditor “Idonotevn” writes in response to the original post: “The feminist subreddits have a few extra rules and work a bit differently than most of reddit, making it difficult for newcomers at times. But I’m sure you can get the hang of it” (n.p.). This comment has also been hyperlinked; the link connects to an Urban Dictionary definition of the phrase “lurk more.” The definition is as follows:

A popular variant spelling of lurk more. It is an expression used when someone demonstrates their ignorance of the customs and social expectations of an online community, or otherwise makes an idiot of themselves online. Its use indicates that the person so instructed should gain familiarity with the community before posting further. (“lurk moar” n.p.)

This moment in the /r/AskFeminism discussion concisely encapsulates the problems with “thorwayfeminism’s” post, but it also reveals the profoundly social nature of argumentation in any medium. “Idonotevn’s” post shows that “thorwayfeminism” has missed the point of engaging in discourse in a feminist space—because s/he has not attempted to understand the “customs and social expectations” of *Reddit*’s feminist community, the post comes off as condescending and disingenuous in tone. The post also makes an ironic observation about the status of feminism in the larger *Reddit* community. The comment itself suggests that feminist subreddits are significantly different from other discussion boards on *Reddit* in their expectation that participants should understand its particular social and discursive conventions. Yet as we will see later in this chapter, all of

Reddit operates on precisely this expectation. The comment reveals why the post has failed in its argumentation, but it also suggests that “thorwayfeminism” neglects an integral aspect of what it means to be an audience. “Thorwayfeminism’s” post fails because s/he cannot conceptualize what an effective appeal would look like in this community, since s/he has not spent enough time assessing those appeals as an audience member. “Idonotevn’s” comment discloses a complex aspect of rhetorical communication: that to make a legitimate claim, one must first be audience to claims as they are presented within a particular community.

While the above example demonstrates the potential for failed argumentation in digital environments, it also reveals the absolute necessity for a speaker to understand her audience by incorporating herself socially into the community that comprises it. Indeed, the instances of digital discourse examined in this chapter reconfigure the relationship between speaker and audience by highlighting the social aspects of rhetorical action. As we know from Chaim Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s treatise and its underpinnings in the Aristotelian tradition, rhetoric has always been profoundly social in nature. The rhetorician grants autonomy to her audience by presenting appeals constructed in concert with the community of listeners, based on premises that the audience finds acceptable and using argumentative conventions appropriate to the situation. Yet the ethical rhetorician who wishes to challenge the status quo cannot merely placate her audience or argue strictly from existing beliefs. This raises a central question about the possibility for rhetorical communities to engage in productive dialogue, both within and outside digital space. How can people create discourse that challenges its members without ostracizing them, that espouses core beliefs without devolving to dogmas? This question can never

be fully resolved, but remains integral to a study of digital argumentation in its multivalent manifestations.

The charges levied at rhetoric across centuries seem to have intensified when aimed at digital argumentation. Online discourse has been accused of breeding only the shallowest relationship between speaker and audience, either placating readers or provoking them to unreasoned anger, discouraging them from thinking beyond what they already believe, or simply manipulating them to just keep clicking. There is no doubt that these charges hold true in plenty of online discourse: the YouTube comment section has not been known to engender profound or meaningful discussions. Yet for every instance of failed or merely inflammatory dialogue, there is an opportunity for readers and authors to form communities of shared interest and strive toward assent on complex issues. This is because the very structure of online discourse encourages a dynamic interrelationship between author and reader. By allowing readers to comment on an author's original post, blogs and comment sections have the potential break down the barrier between speaker and audience, drawing a direct connection between message and response. Online discourse can also foster a sense of community for their readers and authors: audiences coalesce around similar interests or concerns, relying on an intimate knowledge of a group's value systems and discursive conventions. This chapter ultimately suggests that the formation of audience in a digital environment is a continual and emergent process wherein audiences and authors perpetually constitute one another, exchanging roles and practicing a self-reflexive form of rhetorical agency.

First, some caveats. From their advent, blogs and message boards have been vested with revolutionary potential to equalize argumentation and to democratize the

public sphere. Along with increasing availability of internet access to the general public came the attitude that the internet would open discourse to populations that had previously been silenced. In theory, *anyone* (with access to a computer—already economic and social markers spring up unexpected) can publish his or her ideas to the World Wide Web. By that same token, anyone can read, comment upon, criticize or reject those ideas, leaving a textual record of their response for all to see. The audience, then, has far more agency than it would in a traditional rhetorical setting, creating an inclusive and unbiased field for argumentation. These conditions, when stated in such idealized terms, would lead to a utopian public sphere where all members of a discourse community have equal voice. Critics and scholars often celebrate internet communication as the new, ideal public sphere, since it (purportedly) removes all markers of racial, social, and economic identity and allows for unprecedented egalitarianism in argumentation (Morozov).

This attitude, while attuned to blogs' capacity to shift political inequalities of public discourse, has rightly been charged with naiveté and blindness to persistent inequalities based in race, gender, and class (Kolko et. al.). This perspective places too much stock in the relative anonymity of some online settings, and is not attentive enough to social and material realities inseparable from participation in any rhetorical setting. While it is true that an individual might say something in an anonymous environment that they may never say when they could be identified, new media scholars caution against an overly optimistic view of the internet's liberatory potential. For instance, the authors in Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman's anthology *Race in Cyberspace* recognize that concerns of subjectivity do not disappear online. It is impossible to split online identities from

offline markers of cultural status or race. As Kate Hayles and Donna Haraway have shown, we must break down the binary between information and embodiment, recognizing that every online transaction makes an impact on the embodied subjectivity of the user.

While it is integral to maintain a healthy skepticism and to remember that technology is always driven by human motivation, it should be emphasized that the internet provides a productive and impactful discursive space. The role of audience cannot be reduced to listener or reader. Though digital discourse is by no means as equalizing as some would have us believe, their complication—indeed, even their reversal—of the idea of audience grants them revolutionary rhetorical potential. While there is no doubt that the internet has engendered radical changes in how we generate discourse, we still lack a comprehensive analysis of how that discourse actually operates.

Much of the scholarship regarding blogs and the public sphere arises from the Jurgen Habermas's work on the bourgeoisie public sphere (Desai, Warner). Habermas writes of the distinction between public and private spheres, noting that the concept of publicness changed once the bourgeois population came to mediate the relationship between the private realm and the state in the mid-18th century. Before, people relied upon the monarchy or other state-sponsored figures to enact publicness, but the rise of the bourgeois led to a great increase in print media and therefore to the empowerment of the merchant class to hold public, as well as private, identities (Habermas 8-10). The bourgeois public sphere "may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public" (27). In urban coffee shops and salons, the bourgeois engaged in the "public use of reason," discussing political matters so effectively that the state

needed legitimation from the public sphere in order to enact laws (25-30). Habermas also claims that the bourgeois public sphere “preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether,” allowing for rational, unbiased discussion (36). This golden age of public discourse dissolved, however, once the mass media turned information into commodity rather than a tool for democratic deliberation (249).

While information is, of course, still a commodity exchanged and capitalized upon by media corporations, some have viewed digital media as a potential venue for the resurgence of Habermas’s public sphere. Indeed, some of the websites I will examine in this chapter could be seen to profess goals similar to those of the bourgeoisie public sphere. While Habermas’s work continues to be influential for scholars of new media and public discourse, there have been several important critiques of Habermas’s key concepts. Many scholars have criticized Habermas for painting an overly idealized picture of the bourgeois public sphere. Women are conspicuously absent from his history, so feminist critics like Nancy Fraser have been particularly concerned with reassessing his ideas. For Fraser, it is impossible to “bracket” social distinctions, for “a discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction” (60). Habermas not only excludes women, people of color, and the lower class from his public sphere, but he never takes into account “other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” (60-61). To incorporate these “competing public spheres” despite the fact that true neutrality is impossible, Fraser proposes a “post-bourgeois conception” of the public sphere that would “permit us to envision a greater role for (at least some) public spheres than mere autonomous opinion

formation removed from authoritative decision-making” and “think about strong *and* weak publics, as well as about various hybrid forms” while “[theorizing] the range of possible relations among such publics” (76-77). In other words, we should validate the discourses left unsanctioned by the bourgeois public sphere, building a democracy around the inevitability of difference rather than ignoring it altogether.

Digital platforms present a feasible solution for the problems Fraser identifies. While they maintain Habermas’s egalitarianism through relative anonymity, they also allow for the specialization of discussion and difference of opinion Fraser finds necessary. While Habermas envisions a singular public sphere, Fraser’s work captures what has always been true about public discourse: that there are countless discourse communities that function both within and outside the larger sphere of “public” or mass opinion. While it is important to recognize that digital platforms like blogs do not *create* these discursive conditions, they do *facilitate* the proliferation of public discourses as described above. Digital platforms provide relatively safe spaces for “competing public spheres” to develop and interact, all while loosening the usual constraints of time and geographical location. However, it is important to temper the cyber-utopian bent mentioned above. Instead I suggest that blogs generate productive discourse *not* when they allow anyone and everyone to eschew social identity and participate in anonymous discussion, but rather when they allow members to establish authority and mutually construct guidelines for how the discourse community should function.

Public sphere theory as articulated by Michael Warner proves especially fruitful in considering the form and function of publics in digital space. Warner’s book *Publics and Counterpublics* combines the Habermasian attention to the discursive activity of the

public sphere with Fraser's attention to the political and social implications of the formation of publics. Warner widens the scope of what we might consider to be a "public" by conceiving of it as a "cultural form, a kind of practical fiction" that everyone can recognize in their own lives without necessarily naming it as such (8). We are all members of publics, simply by virtue of our participation in the consumption and exchange of information. Warner argues that most if not all forms of cultural production exist by virtue of our participation in and understanding of the concept of a public: without them, "we could not produce most of the books or films or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture; we could not conduct elections or indeed imagine ourselves as members of nations or movements" (8). In Warner's rendering, a public is a space where people with shared interests and goals come together to exchange information as a way of *making meaning*. Central to Warner's work is the idea that "a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity" (11-12). Publics are essentially discursive spaces, where membership coalesces around interpretive action. This concept proves crucial to the project at hand, as it details the process by which individuals that have never met can come together and form a public solely through the digital exchange of information.

Warner's work also proves integral to the rhetorical concerns of this project. The notion of address is key to the formation of a public: a public can only exist "*by virtue of being addressed*" (Warner 67, emphasis original). Here Warner essentially argues that a public exists only by virtue of its social context. When we belong to a public, we are also members of an audience. This also functions in the inverse: when we are in audience to a

particular appeal, we are also part of the public toward which that appeal is targeted. This might appear to suggest that *everything* is geared toward an audience, that everything would fall in the purview of some public or another. Indeed, in a Burkean sense we might argue that everything is rhetorical and that we are always part of one audience or another. Yet this claim about the role of address in the formation of publics captures something important about the rhetorical nature of audience and appeal. Warner notes that “a public is never just a congeries of people, never just the sum of persons who happen to exist” or who might be around to hear a particular appeal (68). Rather, a public “must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse” (68). In other words, it must agree upon the terms and goals of its existence, and there must be some conventions that govern the methods of address. In this sense, Warner’s theory implies a deeply social conceptualization of audience. A public can conceptualize itself only as a function of its constituency; an individual must recognize the issues that matter and demonstrate the proper modes of address as a part of membership in that public. Even further, one can only act as a productive member of an audience through their understanding of the exigencies for a particular public; even to *listen*, to receive and interpret an appeal, requires knowledge of the social context in which a public exists.

Social context informs the very structure of a public; thus the structure of a public is never static. A public continually evolves and adapts, re-conceptualizing itself to meet new challenges or accommodate new interests. This sense of continuous adaptation characterizes the most basic functioning of a public, determining the ways that members of a public address one another and the way that a public envisions itself. One of Warner’s central claims is that “when people address publics, they engage in struggles...

over the conditions that bring them together as a public” (12). This sort of “metapragmatic work,” this deliberate and reflexive self-naming, is deeply rhetorical work linked inextricably to members’ identity and agency: it is the way we describe our social world and the roles we play within it (12). Thus, thinking about how a public describes itself will be an integral aspect of this project. I will ask, along with Warner, “What kind of public is this? How is it being addressed?” (12). These questions are necessary not just to describe the discursive conditions in which a particular public exists, but to understand the process by which publics collaborate to make meaning.

This may seem like a simple, or perhaps even self-evident, proposition: that every public appeal is geared toward a particular audience. But Warner’s work captures a deeply complex and enigmatic aspect of the nature of rhetorical action, and one that digital discourse gives us an unprecedented opportunity to trace: the notion that the attempt to aim an appeal toward a particular audience always requires some amount of interpretive creativity. In other words, the speaker must always take some form of “artistic license” as she envisions the audience she will address; she must form an amalgamation of her audience’s identity based upon her experiences and interactions with the group, combined with her own motivations and expectations for how the group might react. This is the sort of interpretive work that we do every day, as we participate in various discourse communities and process appeals from any number of publics to which we belong. Yet as Warner points out, the very fact that this will always be *interpretive* work, that one can never fully know the audience they’re addressing, is what makes the functioning of publics so difficult to describe. Warner argues that while most individuals are intimately familiar with what it feels like to belong to a public, that the

public itself is actually a fiction, a “social imaginary” generated by members to lend coherence to its interactions (Warner 12). Thus Warner reveals the paradoxical nature of publics, and of audiences more generally. Warner notes that “in order to address a public, one must forget or ignore the fictional nature of the entity one addresses” in order for the interpretive work of a public to take place (12). In other words, one must forget that they are addressing an imagined audience, the constituency of which could never be accurately or exhaustively described.

Warner’s work speaks to the paradoxical nature of public space, which rhetorical scholars have long attempted to describe. Indeed, *Publics and Counterpublics* resonates with Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s treatise, *The New Rhetoric (TNR)*. We have seen in Warner’s work that publics generate rhetorical action based on the assumption that there is a knowable, definable audience with mutual interests and goals. Yet the very nature of a public as shared discursive space rests also on a shared fiction, for the public only exists by virtue of the rhetorical action that takes place within it-- and that rhetorical action can only ever be based on an at least partially fictionalized understanding of a public’s membership. A public sphere exists to facilitate this rhetorical exchange, but simultaneously it *is* rhetorical exchange: it exists not in some tangible, physical location but in the individual and collective minds of its members. This reading is integral to understanding Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s conception of audience in *TNR*. Indeed, it is not so different from the assertion that “the audience, as visualized by one undertaking to argue, is always a more or less systematized construction” (19). An audience is always imaginary, albeit to varying degrees. The key to rhetorical success lies in the ability to “form a *concept* of the anticipated audience as

close as possible to reality” (20, emphasis added). A speaker’s interpretation of their audience will always be conceptual, interpretively creative, yet it attempts to align with some version of the “reality” of the audience or public the speaker hopes to reach. This paradoxical yet functional relationship between the “concept” or “systematized construction” of an audience and its “reality” (which the speaker can never fully access) characterizes the enigmatic process by which speakers and audiences make rhetorical contact, despite the fundamental unknowability on which the speaker-audience relationship is based.

Warner, Perelman, and Olbrechts-Tyteca theorize the essentially social nature of argumentation. Though their works emphasize the impossibility of ever *knowing* an audience or public in an objective sense, they ultimately suggest that meaningful discursive exchange necessarily proceeds from thoughtful, deliberate, and compassionate attempts on the part of both speaker and audience to understand those with which one attempts to communicate. The speaker’s characterization of an audience cannot arise from shallow guesswork, or the argumentation will be unsuccessful. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note, “an inadequate picture of the audience, resulting from either ignorance or an unforeseen set of circumstances, can have very unfortunate results” (20). The speaker not only risks missing the argumentative mark when attempting to persuade an audience she does not fully understand, but also cannot hope to have a meaningful exchange in a social milieu where the conventions or values are unknown to her. This social imperative is especially important to recognize in digital publics, where it is not uncommon for people who may not belong to a particular public to join in a rhetorical exchange. While the ease of commenting on a blog or joining a social media website may

at first appear to degrade the importance of community membership—it might seem that anyone can be a part of any public by virtue of their ability to sign up with a particular website—it actually has the opposite effect. Although anyone with access to the internet may be able to join a blog site and chime in on a conversation, the standards for participating in a public remain the same in that a member must be able to demonstrate her understanding of argumentative conditions, as well as the social and cultural exigencies that motivate them.

As with any form of successful or productive argumentation, digital argumentation proceeds from a profound commitment to the social community with which one argues. Discourse in a venue such as the YouTube comment section degenerates into name-calling precisely because participation in this venue does not require any such commitment. The standards for argumentation set forth in *TNR* help us to explicate the process by which speakers and audiences form meaningful discourse communities. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca base their treatise on the idea that “for argumentation to exist, an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment. There must first of all be agreement, in principle, on the formation of this intellectual community” (14). This basic tenet, which the authors term the “contact of minds,” relies upon a mutual respect and willingness (but not obligation) to accept a speaker’s argument. As with Warner’s description of the formation of a public, the idea seems almost self-evident on one level: it essentially means that a speaker must have a reason to address his audience, and that the audience must have a reason to listen. Yet the element of reciprocity inherent in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s theory makes for a similarly complex relationship between the speaker and her audience. Since the contact

of minds establishes an intellectual *community*, the speaker must demonstrate some commitment to the concerns and interest of the group. To maintain this sense of community, “a person must attach some importance to gaining the adherence of his interlocutor, to securing his assent, his mental cooperation”—and to be able to do this, she must understand the social context into which she speaks (16). By that same token, “we must not forget that by listening to someone we display a willingness to eventually accept his point of view;” the audience authorizes the speaker’s position simply by allowing him to communicate it (17). Once again we see that listening itself is a rhetorical act. The audience grants the speaker membership to a public simply by entertaining the speaker’s appeal. Thus, the audience drives argumentation as much or more than the speaker herself.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca readily accept, however, that it is not always possible to determine exactly who comprises an audience. Similarly to Warner’s work, *TNR* explicates the paradoxical act of addressing an audience that can only ever be a “systematized construction” (19). The authors recognize, again similarly to Warner, that this is a functional paradox, one that has never stopped people from addressing publics that they may not be able to exhaustively describe. For practical purposes, the authors define audience as “*the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation*” (19, emphasis original). This definition allows for the inevitable uncertainty involved in characterizing an audience. Here, the audience is a group that the speaker can only “[wish] to influence”—this places the onus on the audience to show whether or not the argument has been successful, but it also suggests that the speaker must first envision an “ensemble” of people who might make an appropriate audience to

an appeal. The definition also addresses the reality of the process by which argumentation proceeds: since “every speaker thinks, more or less consciously, of those he is seeking to persuade,” it is possible to determine at least a general sense of whom the argument is meant to address. Although it may not be possible to describe the precise constitutive makeup of an audience, and while the speaker’s notions about an audience inevitably inform her argumentation, it is still safe to work from the assumption that “every social circle or milieu is distinguishable in terms of its dominant opinions and unquestioned beliefs, of the premises that it takes for granted without hesitation” (20). Thus it is possible to discern the overarching goals and values of a public—and argumentation could never exist without the ability to characterize, at least in broad strokes, the interests and concerns of an audience.

The authors outline three types of audience in the first part of the treatise: the universal audience, the single interlocutor, and the subject himself when engaged in internal deliberation (30). Examining the first two types lends insight into the speaker-audience dynamic in digital settings. The first type of audience, the universal audience, “consists of the whole of mankind,” so that attaining universal agreement indicates not just attaining complete unanimity by arguing something no one can argue against, but agreeing upon “something that might plausibly be good for humans as such” (Crosswhite 425). Argumentation at the level of the universal audience must be considered, in a given cultural and social moment, “*real, true, and objectively valid*”—it must be something that anyone in their right mind (and member of the same culturally-determined value system) would agree with.

The authors maintain that even when a speaker addresses a specific, embodied audience, he has in mind a universal audience “transcending all others” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 34). They do not suggest that a speaker literally envisions every social and cultural group in the world when she argues, however. Since the audience is always a construction of the speaker, the speaker “constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men,” so that “each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience” (33). The authors see social context as the foundation for all types of argumentation, even those that claim universal validity. This points to the complexity of the universal audience as a concept: it is at once an abstract sort of test-case that allows a speaker to place her argument against logical objectivity, and it is a socially contingent envisioning on the part of the speaker of what humans as a group should value. Indeed, much of the time the universal audience is a tool for the speaker to gauge the success of an argument beyond the immediate context of a particular audience. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca claim that the universal audience exists for the speaker as a way to “characterize” the embodied audience, and that the “undefined universal audience...is invoked to pass judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to such a concrete audience” (35). In other words, the speaker’s abstract idea of what his audience will believe or find acceptable governs what material he presents to the literal audience before him. The speaker must determine the universal audience not just based upon his own experiences, but must also be able to ascertain how the literal audience before him might be characterized as a universal audience—what would count as “*real, true, and objectively valid*” for the group before him?

The second type of audience, the single hearer, jumps straight from abstract universality to direct, unmediated discourse with a single interlocutor. Once a speaker goes from arguing in front of a group to speaking with a single listener, the universal audience holds less sway over what the speaker will say. An audience of one is too particular to universalize, especially since she has “reactions that are known to us, or at least characteristics we can study” (31). Here the speaker works from knowledge gained from interactions with an individual to ascertain what might make a successful appeal. Thus, argumentation with a single hearer “has no philosophic significance unless it claims to be valid for all,” or unless “the interlocutor is regarded as an incarnation of the universal audience” (37). Instead, the content of the argument rests directly upon the listener’s reactions and contributions (37). In direct discourse, the speaker “has to prove the contested point, apprise himself of the reasons for his interlocutor’s resistance, and thoroughly understand his objections” (35). Here the speaker’s responsibility is not to satisfy a universal or objective standard, but to present an argument that accounts for a listener’s particular concerns and values. Thus, argumentation toward a universal audience versus a single listener can take very different forms. While universalized argumentation seeks a mutually agreed-upon standard of objectivity, argumentation with a single listener opens up potential ambiguities and complications based upon the listener’s own value system. This ultimately suggests that the single listener has more rhetorical autonomy than members of a universalized audience, since she has the potential to determine the course of the argument by offering objections or contributing her own reasoning.

Digital publics present a dynamic interplay between these two general types of audience. While digital audiences may at first seem universal, given their purportedly global and often anonymous nature, oftentimes blogs or comment boards function by forming particular audiences comprised of people with shared interests and values. Yet on major websites, including ones I will examine here, the speaker must retain awareness that her audience may be much wider than it first appears, that those listening in on her argumentation may not be members of a particular audience. This has always been the case with argumentation and public address, but becomes more salient in online settings since the person outside the particular audience can join the conversation by commenting. Rather than viewing a single interlocutor as a composite of the universal audience, the author must imagine the universal audience as a set of interlocutors who have the autonomy to question or alter the blogger's original message. For instance, a reader can post a comment disagreeing with the post, swaying the next reader's reaction to the argument by inscribing the comment on the same continuum as the original text. In many cases, the author responds directly to a reader's comment, granting it the same authority as the initial message. So while the digital author may have a universal audience in mind as she composes a post, she keeps them in mind not only to persuade them, but to anticipate their responses and possible points of disagreement. This dynamic flux between author and audience, made possible by the immediacy of interaction in comment sections, sets digital discourse apart from other venues for argumentation.

Blogs and comment threads invite us to trace the fluid boundary between speaker and audience in a space that allows for multiple structural manifestations of how speakers and audiences should interact. While some digital platforms may at first appear formless

and disorganized, most have rules and conventions that impact the way that discourse proceeds. Such rules are designed to bring some level of control to the discussion, and in the most successful cases the rules are both determined and enforced by the community itself, rather than by moderators or webmasters. Even prior to participation in discussion, however, individuals with internet access must be sanctioned by a larger organization to start a blog or launch a website. While this may be as simple as registering under a site like Wordpress or creating a username on *Reddit*, it nonetheless acts as an initial gatekeeper for participation. Although this method of establishing authority may at first appear to contradict the utopian aims of the internet as a global public sphere where all participants have equal access, in truth it encourages the sort of community that Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Habermas find necessary for effective argumentation. By committing to blog membership, the user accepts certain guidelines deemed appropriate for argumentation in the discourse community, and agrees to meet a standard of seriousness, as well. With the amount of trolling and spamming online, it becomes necessary to discourage such activity by asking for at least a minimum commitment to establishing contact of minds. These sorts of standards appear in discourse taking place in any medium; social and argumentative conventions make productive dialogue possible.

Each site encourages its members to establish authority within its particular discourse community, but doing so exacts varying amounts of control over the way arguments unfold. Sites grant more or less autonomy to their users, which determines the audience's interlocutory power. A blog usually asks prospective members for a username and a valid email, meaning that the member must already have a web identity to participate. Once the member gains entry to the community, they must still establish

authority to hold sway in argumentation. Users gain cachet in their online communities by accumulating “upvotes,” comments, and “followers.” For the purposes of this project, I will examine three sites with varying levels of commenter autonomy: *Reddit*, *Daily Kos*, and *The New York Times*. Each of these sites constructs a unified community for discussion, yet they do so in markedly different ways. These three sites present a range of approaches toward the increasingly fluid boundary between author and audience; arguments take shape based not only on the community’s shared interests, but also on the way that the site structures the relationship between author and commenter. Each site also has its own methods for allowing authors or commenters to establish authority. Studying the rules and gauges of authority these community-driven sites prescribe will help us unpack the relationship between author and audience in a digital environment. To this end, I will provide a brief overview of each site’s structure and regulations, then examine a sample posting to assess audience authority in relation to the original post.

The selection of the three sites (*Reddit*, *Daily Kos*, and *The New York Times*) is not arbitrary. The three platforms represent a spectrum of commenter autonomy, with each site moving further and further from traditional notions of authorship and its relationship to audience. As one might expect, *The New York Times* is more traditional and journalistic in nature, blending formal reporting with op-ed pieces and blog posts, all of which the reader can comment upon. The site retains the boundary between author and audience, yet demonstrates how digital commenting can grant the audience more authority than it might have in other rhetorical situations. *Daily Kos*, the second site I will examine, is a political blog where author and audience begin to blend: users write “diaries” and accrue authority by writing effective comments and receiving

recommendations from fellow members. The third site, *Reddit*, is deeply devoted to community-- discussions unfold much more freely here, yet still rely on codified structures and shared goals. On *Reddit*, users “upvote” comments or posts so that the community, rather than moderators or editors, determine the visibility of information. Here, audience and author are nearly indistinguishable. Looking at this spectrum of blog configurations draws important comparisons between the types of discourse occurring in formalized and strictly moderated spaces, versus spaces that are self-regulated and driven by a more equitable relationship between author and audience.

I will ask the following guiding questions of each blog:

- How does the site structure the relationship between author and commenter?
- How does a commenter establish enough authority to contribute to discussion?
- Do the commenters have the power to change the direction of the argument or alter the original text’s conclusion?
- To what extent is the site self-regulated, rather than being regulated by moderators or editors?

These basic questions, among others, will help draw a larger conclusion about the transforming concept of audience and the extent to which the gradation of autonomy shapes discourse.

The first site, *The New York Times (NYT)*, builds upon its status as one of America’s most reputable news sources. Known for thoughtful and thorough reporting as well as cultural commentary, *NYT* attempts to adapt those same standards to the digital

medium. It is worthwhile to examine this site as a study of one of the more successful transitions from print to digital news reporting, though this chapter will not pursue that element of *NYT* in depth. It is also worth noting that unlike the other two platforms I will examine, *NYT* originated as a print publication and still exists as such. Indeed, part of the reasoning for choosing this site is that it melds traditional conventions of print-based journalism while still creating a space for audience participation. The structure of the site largely mirrors its print-based counterpart; it contains the same categories for content—Politics, Sports, Opinion, Magazine, and so on. In fact, the site does not use the word “blog” at all, though the opinion articles we come to expect from blog sites like *Jezebel* or other web-based outlets seem to have been influenced by the op-ed genre.

The most significant difference between the print and digital versions of *NYT* (aside from multimedia and hyperlinking, which I will assess in Chapter 3) is the potential for reader participation. The reader can comment on any of the *NYT* opinion pieces, though perhaps significantly the site does not allow commenting on non-opinion articles. This appears to be one of *NYT*'s traditional holdouts: while elsewhere on the internet all news is considered subject to questioning, here the editors construct a boundary between the subjective and objective, perhaps suggesting that strict reporting need not open itself to interpretation. All of the articles come from *NYT*'s cadre of reporters and columnists, rather than opening the forum to independent bloggers. Indeed, *NYT* deliberately retains elements of the speaker/audience dichotomy, since its original posts come from authoritative sources and the audience can comment, but not create.

Part of the imperative behind retaining this dichotomy between speaker and audience is that *NYT* prides itself on a certain level of rigor and repute. The readers and

editors of *NYT* share concern with journalistic integrity and authority; not surprisingly, the site showcases its columnists and lends their voices primacy over the comments of its readers. Presumably the audience is more interested in the voices of the columnists as well, but this does not mean that the site does not make room for the voices of its readers. *NYT* builds audience participation into the overall reading experience. For instance, the *NYT*'s latest digital offering is the “nytOpinion” app, a limited subscription that gains the reader access to *NYT* opinion pieces. The app offers “curated commentary” from “respected contributors from around the globe,” providing “unlimited access to the most influential minds in journalism” (“NYT Opinion” n.p.). The app promises journalistic integrity and intellectualism, to which the *NYT* audience is clearly committed (and may consider difficult to find in other venues more open to direct participation by the audience). Yet the app also adapts to the digital imperative to allow readers to “connect,” to participate actively in the discourse and exercise choice in what and how they read. The new app mirrors the balance that *NYT* attempts to strike on the site overall: a balance between journalistic authority and reader autonomy, between traditional reporting and open discourse, between print and digital conventions.

The site's expectations for the reader's participation show its interest in building a genuine discourse community that takes argumentation seriously. *NYT* employs a stratified commenting system aiming to ensure a disciplined and thoughtful level of discussion. It does so, however, while still allowing anyone with an email account and access to a computer to comment on op-ed pieces. To register with *NYT* (which is necessary to comment), a reader need create a new account by submitting an email address. Gaining access to the commenting function is quite simple, but the site has other

ways of controlling the discourse. Even the placement of the comments section in relation to the original article plays a role in the way that discussions unfold. When a reader selects an article, they can choose whether or not to display the comments by clicking a button on the top right of the page. Most sites with comment functions display the comments at the bottom of the page, suggesting that the original argument continues to develop into the comments section. On *NYT*, however, the comments appear in a tab along the right side of the screen, so that the reader can hide or display them at any point as she reads the entirety of the article. This at once foregrounds the authority of original piece and gives the reader more autonomy over the reading experience—she can select how many voices and perspectives she wants to hear as she reads the original piece.

While *NYT* creates a flexible reading experience for the audience, it also imposes stringent guidelines on the way that discussion occurs. Once a reader registers with *NYT*, they are free to comment on any of the site's opinion pieces, but the comments are quickly sorted into a hierarchy. The comments section includes three tabs: "NYT Picks," "Readers' Picks," and "All" (*The New York Times* n.p.). When a reader contributes a comment, it appears in the "All" column. All of the comments have the potential to move higher up in the hierarchy, however. Readers play a significant role in the determining the category of a comment; they can "recommend" comments that they find particularly productive. If a comment receives enough recommendations, it will appear in the "Readers' Picks" column. Yet *NYT* appears to have the most say in where a comment ends up and how visible it becomes. Like most sites invested in avoiding trolling and hate speech, *NYT* moderates its comments by allowing readers to "flag" comments they deem inappropriate. They also curate the comments that appear in the "NYT Picks" section,

choosing comments that many readers have recommended and that have an elevated level of thoughtfulness and complexity. Readers can choose to comb through the “All” section, which may contain hundreds of comments, or they can trust *NYT* to select the highlights for them.

NYT plays an active role in determining the visibility of readers’ comments. Its process for categorizing comments allows readers to choose their own experience and, like the aforementioned app, plays upon the trust between *NYT* and its readership that *NYT* will provide a level of intellectual rigor and journalistic formality. This mentality makes its way into the conventions for commenting on *NYT*. It would seem that the *NYT* audience is not as concerned with establishing dialogue between readers, but in responding directly to the ideas in the original piece. This may be partly due to the fact that the commenting function does not allow readers to respond directly to one another, but rather to add a comment to the existing list (which readers can then recommend, but not respond to). This in turn impacts the structure and content of readers’ comments.

To better understand the nature and function of comments on *NYT*, I will examine the comments on an article titled “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture,” written by A. O. Scott and published to the Magazine section of the site on September 11, 2014. The piece is a meditation on the increasing infantilization of adult characters in pop culture and the fading role of the patriarch as a cultural icon (Scott n.p.). This opinion/cultural commentary piece has 871 total comments, 509 “Readers’ Picks” and 23 “NYT Picks.” While the comment section has since closed, the comments remain visible. A quick glance through the comments in all three tabs shows that most comments are at least a full paragraph in length, if not more (the comment sections on other articles follow

this trend as well). *NYT* could be said to encourage this by selecting lengthy comments for the “NYT Picks” category. Most of the “NYT Picks” also have numerous recommendations from other readers, suggesting that *NYT* takes the opinions of its readers seriously; in fact, many of the “NYT Picks” are also “Readers’ Picks.”

Comments in all three sections demonstrate a relatively high level of analysis—in addition to using conventional grammatical structures and spelling, writing in complete sentences, and using advanced vocabulary, the most popular comments tend to build off the original article either by referencing relevant cultural texts or referring to anecdotal evidence. For instance, Figure D below shows one of the most popular comments under “NYT Picks,” with 843 recommendations from fellow readers, notes in response to Scott’s piece that “The authoritative male figure thrives on stability. In a time where that’s no longer possible, a sense of uprootedness naturally makes its way into art and masculinity and general culture” (“Ryan,” n.p.). Figure C below shows a comment from “MCS,” which appears first in the list of “NYT Picks” and has 660 recommendations, laments that the figure of the “child adult” has its roots in television and wreaks great damage upon professional, adult behavior in the real world: “Two colleagues meeting for a drink, has now become the entire office staff walking to a bar like children on a field trip, proceeding to pound shots and behave as if the bar is the den of a frat house” (“MCS” n.p.). These comments build upon the author’s thesis by contributing additional evidence or placing the post in a larger cultural context.

All 871 Readers' Picks 513 NYT Picks 23

MCS New York • September 11, 2014

Fascinating piece Mr. Scott. Having been in a decade long ponder over what exactly has changed in the culture that has created this pervasive "child adult". I can only point to television as the culprit. Its power has steamrolled literature, film, and art. It has brainwashed, literally, hordes of women to move to Manhattan to be Carrie Underwood, often to their disillusionment, countless men to refer to each other as "bro" (I'm not your bro if you don't know") and a general informality towards all the great rituals of adulthood that have been around for centuries. Two colleagues meeting for a drink, has now become the entire office staff walking to a bar like children on a field trip, proceeding to pound shots and behave as if a bar is the den of a frat house. It wasn't always this way. Reality TV has brought out the worst in us, and for some has become a bible for how to gain the most attention in life through behaving like a child with an attention disorder. Critical is now called "being negative" and individuality is looked upon with enviable suspicion. If I sound old and cranky it's because I am. If it sounds like I'm saying things were once better, more sophisticated, of a higher standard, it's simply because things were better. Manhattan was once a city of adults.

663 Recommend

Figure C: "NYT Picks" comment from user "MCS"

All 871 Readers' Picks 513 NYT Picks 23

Ryan DC • September 11, 2014

The premise makes a lot of sense, but the piece is missing a crucial economic element. The reliable, hard-working career job that a man could expect to keep his whole life is virtually non-existent in 2014. With near-constant downsizing across different industries, staying one place too long makes an employee a liability rather than an asset.

The authoritative male figure thrives on stability. In a time where that's no longer possible, a sense of uprootedness naturally makes its way into art and masculinity and general culture.

848 Recommend · f t

Flag

Figure D: "Readers' Picks" comment from user "Ryan."

Not all comments agree with the Scott's argument; a comment with 579 recommendations asserts that "Adulthood, male or female is not dead. There are as many, if not more, communities in this country where two people devoted to each other for life have children, work hard to raise them, do good things for their communities," and so on ("Stuart Wilder" n.p.). This comment suggests that television is not an accurate

or reliable gauge for the lived experience of American adults. From this and similar comments it is clear that *NYT* does not simply select comments that affirm the original piece. Rather, they highlight well-reasoned pieces of argumentation that include adequate evidence and demonstrate their relevance to the discourse by accruing recommendations from fellow readers.

These excerpts from comments demonstrate much about the approach to commenting on *NYT*. Most comments take a concept from the original piece to build upon, adding their own evidence and analysis to either affirm or deny the author's thesis. In this way, argumentation on *NYT* unfolds in much the same way as it would in a traditional, paper-based setting. The comments section is not as intertextual or socially motivated as it might be on other platforms, since it does not allow interlocutors to reply directly to another person's comment. While one user might address another in a comment, the comments show up chronologically, so that responses do not appear directly beneath the comment it responds to. Thus the comments section reads like a series of independent pieces of writing—they each expound on their own reactions to the original piece in what often resembles a letter to the editor or to the author himself (and *NYT* asks that any further responses be directed as a letter to the editor once the comments section closes). Once again we see the remnants of a print-based culture governing discussion at *NYT*. While the reader can experiment with their own thinking by composing a formal, analytical comment in paragraph structure, the hierarchic structure of the comments section makes it difficult to discern any dialogue between readers. Because *NYT* grants authority to individual comments rather than to the commenters themselves, there is not as much space for a community of readers to develop.

Yet *NYT*'s commenting system does grant an interesting form of authority to the individual audience member. One successful comment has the potential to rival the original article in influence. Since the reader can view comments side-by-side with the article, rather than scrolling all the way down to the bottom to view audience input, a comment that complicates or disagrees with the original article can shade the entire reading experience. For example, a "NYT Picks" comment from "Elizabeth Bennet" with 313 recommendations critiques the causality Scott sets up in his article. She notes that "While TV and fiction may play a role in the perpetual immaturity of our current society, there are other factors at work here," eventually concluding that "this essay is amusing, but it's analysis lite" ("Elizabeth Bennet" n.p.). Such a comment throws the original argument into question, and it does so by introducing solid evidence and analysis. The *NYT* comments section serves as a platform for rigorous argumentation which can impact the reception of the original piece. This argumentation takes place based largely on a system designed by *NYT* itself, however. The hierarchic conventions for commenting ensures that the discourse will attain a certain level of formality, yet it also means that the audience lacks the authority and autonomy it might gain in other platforms.

NYT creates a space for individuals to reason within a predetermined system. A single audience member can take issue with and potentially influence the author's original text, but argumentation proceeds on an individual basis—it takes the form of a single audience member reasoning about the author's text, rather than author and audience reasoning together. *NYT* retains the distinction between author and audience, so that arguments are more regimented and less social in nature. Yet this standard aligns perfectly with the needs and desires of the *NYT* audience. The comment section seems to

be more about supplementing the original reading experience than creating a dialogue within the audience. Readers visit *NYT* because they want an assurance of high standards and intellectualism—the audience itself is invested in retaining the distinction between author and audience, perhaps in part because when author and audience begin to blend together, all standards for discourse also begin to shift.

The print-based model of discourse begins to fall apart when all members of the audience have equal say in the discussion (and discourse begins to look quite different in purely social writing environments, as we will see in the examination of *Reddit*). Perhaps the desire to maintain the boundary between author and audience springs partly from the trepidation that granting every comment equal visibility will threaten the rigor of the discussion. It's clear that readers of the *NYT* seek discussions more ethical and nuanced than those occurring in YouTube comments, for example. But even beyond the (perhaps well-founded) concern that discourse will degenerate into name-calling if left uncontrolled, the *NYT* and its audience demonstrate an interest in separating authors' content from readers' comments. In doing so, the site deliberately prioritizes the author's role as the purveyor of information, opinion, and knowledge. The audience is free to comment upon the author's original post, but even if it is the most recommended comment of the "NYT Picks" section, it can only manifest as a response, a reflection upon the author's work. This may not grant the audience a tremendous amount of interlocutory power, but it does hew to the discursive standards set forth by a traditional author/audience relationship.

Those discursive standards begin to blur on the next site I will examine, titled *Daily Kos*. It is difficult in this venue to separate the audience from the set of active

authors, which may be partly because of the nature of the site: it is a self-proclaimed blogging site, rather than a digital newspaper featuring op-ed pieces such as *NYT*. But it is also more explicitly devoted to fostering a productive and collaborative community of thinkers. “Kos,” the site’s creator and namesake, outlines the purpose of the blog in a post from 2004: “This is a Democratic blog, a partisan blog...But it’s not a liberal blog. It’s a Democratic blog with one goal in mind: electoral victory. And since we haven’t gotten any of that from the current crew, we’re one more thing: a reform blog” (“Memo” n.p.).ⁱ As in the Habermasian public sphere, *Daily Kos* organizes itself around discussing and enacting political change rather than just commenting on political conditions. Although the site is Democratic, it values the process of “electoral victory” over partisanship. The universal audience at *Daily Kos*, then, gets addressed as a set of interlocutors, voters, and deliberating, active citizens of democracy.

Daily Kos’s conception of itself as a public makes its way into the structure of the site. Since its membership figures itself as a space where active, participatory democracy can function, the site follows suite: discourse proceeds according to the needs of the audience, and the organization of articles is based upon the interests of the site’s membership. Indeed, most members of the site’s intended audience are also authors. As on *NYT*, users must register in order to participate, but on *Daily Kos*, they comment upon fellow readers’ blog entries more often than they respond to articles from contributing authors. There is a set of official authors and editors, chosen by Kos, who are authorized to publish articles to the “front page” of the blog. While “front page” articles receive significant amounts of comments, “most of the action takes place inside of diaries,” or blogs written by users of the site (“*Daily Kos*” n.p.). Anyone can sign up by submitting

an email address, but because of the added authority of being able to post diaries, and to prevent trolls, *DK* requires a one-day waiting period for commenting and a one-week period for posting blogs. But once the user enters the community, she can post as many comments as she likes, and can contribute one diary per day. Thus, members can build authority by receiving recommendations from their peers. Enough recommendations will boost a diary to the Recommended list (see Figure E), which displays the diary prominently above the others and generates more comments.



Figure E: “Most Recommended Diaries” on *Daily Kos*.

According to dKosopedia, an encyclopedia site devoted solely to *DK*, “Diaries moving to the Recommended list is a democratic process; the diaries on the list are the ones that received the most ‘votes’ to be there” (n.p.). Allowing members to “vote” for the most thought-provoking diaries shows the site’s commitment to community-driven discourse. Not only that, but bloggers can accumulate “mojo” by receiving positive

feedback in the form of “tips” from other readers in their diary’s “tip jar.” Bloggers with a lot of “mojo” get bumped up on the People list found off of the main page. This ranks site members based on their recommendations, amount of participation, number of followers, and “mojo level.” This not only allows members of *Daily Kos* to build argumentative authority within their community, but it also lets readers highlight the issues that matter to them. The audience has the power to determine which diaries are relevant—and thus visible—to this community of thinkers and writers. Along with the ability to contribute meaningfully to the site comes the responsibility to do so according to set guidelines. The site’s Frequently Asked Questions page, also on dKospedia, lists in great detail the standards for participation on the site (n.p.). Thus, *DK* establishes contact of minds by employing mutually agreeable conventions that lend structure and coherence to the discourse.

Because *Daily Kos* is built upon user participation, its audience functions as a set of interlocutors with the capacity to question and complicate an original post. In fact, diaries often serve as a mere springboard for lively and thoughtful debates in the comment section, where comments can rival the original post in their length and complexity. The structure of the comments section allows such complex and self-referential conversations to unfold. Unlike the *NYT* commenting function, *DK* commenters can reply to one another, and reply they do—a majority of the comments on a given diary respond directly to other comments. Rather than positing an argument targeted directly at the original author in isolation from other comments, as on *NYT*, here commenters build off each other’s thinking to arrive at arguments of mutual interest. The comments range from less than a sentence to paragraphs in length. Many of the

comments are longer than the original diary, and they often quote the diary or other comments, as well as including links to other pertinent articles. Comments on *DK* are intertextual and proceed from an understanding of the argumentative conventions and general etiquette on the site. For instance, each comment has a subject line that can house a title or the first few words of a comment. Some choose to include the entire body of their comment in the allotted space of the subject line, but the site's FAQ asks that the commenter indicate this by typing "NT" or "n/t" at the end of the subject line, so that other readers know not to look for further text. The subject line becomes a sort of shorthand among *DK* participants, though it appears confusing to readers new to the site. These sorts of shared conventions demonstrate *DK*'s deliberate attention to the form and function of the site as a public.

Indeed, the very format of the comments section reveals important details about the way that speakers and audiences interact on the site. The comments section appears to readers as a long chain where one can scroll chronologically from the "beginning" of the conversation to the end. The way that discussions actually unfold is slightly more complicated, however. A commenter has the option of creating a "parent" comment, to which other commenters can then respond, as shown in Figure F. So, while the reader can scroll chronologically through the parent comments, the chronology breaks apart when someone responds to a parent comment, since this might get posted more recently than the parent comment that follows.

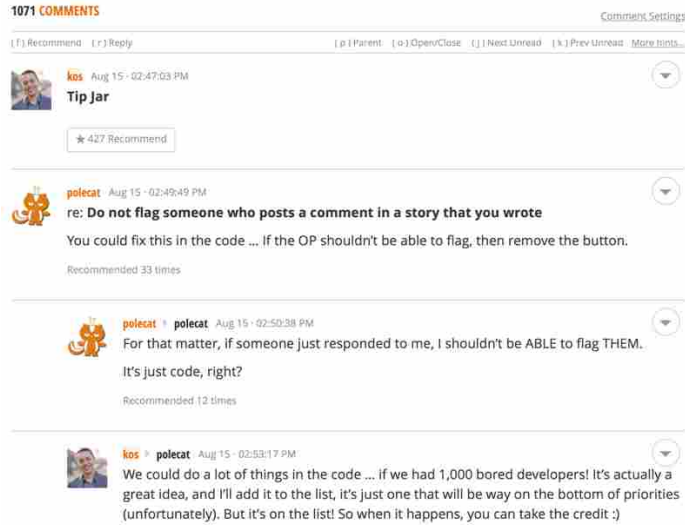


Figure F: Parent Comment from user “Polecat” with response from “Kos.”

This means that while the comment section may at first appear chronological, there might be several different conversations occurring simultaneously. The apparently-linear structure of the comments gives way to a multi-faceted discourse where readers can pursue threads of argument that matter most to them. The semi-chronological structure also resists hierarchy to a degree. For example, the audience can recommend other comments, and sites like *NYT* use those recommendations to rank the comments. On *DK*, however, the recommendations appear next to a comment but have no bearing on its placement within the larger conversation. The recommendation appears instead on the user’s profile, allowing the user to build authority within the community while still letting the conversation unfold more naturally as a dialogue. The structure of *DK* prioritizes granting visibility to comments or diaries that readers care about, rather than selecting the “best” or most rigorous parts of the discourse.

To show how these principles work in practice, I will examine the argumentation of one diary and its comments. The diary is titled “#GamerGate. The battle on the internet you haven’t heard of,” and it was posted by *DK* member “sideboth” on October

15, 2014. This diary, with 513 comments and 186 recommendations, explores the recent #Gamergate controversy within the video gaming community. A brief background: the #Gamergate hashtag emerged when the spurned ex-boyfriend of a female game designer accused the game designer of exchanging sexual acts for positive reviews on her most recent video game. The accusation led to death and rape threats against the game designer, despite the fact that the #Gamergate movement claimed only to support ethics in gaming journalism. This spurred a national debate about misogyny and violence within the gaming community. The *DK* diarist summarizes this controversy and links to several pertinent articles before moving into his/her own argument, that the #Gamergate phenomenon is just one more instance of white male privilege reacting against an increasingly diverse and inclusive culture, especially in the world of gaming. According to “sideboth,” the white male demographic traditionally associated with gaming was reacting against the fact that “video games had to appeal to...a market that included minorities, LGBT and women” (n.p.). Overall, the piece serves to introduce the audience to this controversy while also contributing commentary on the issue and why it matters.

The “#Gamergate” diary challenges the *DK* audience, and in doing so reveals its capacity to work through complex issues via thoughtful argumentation and shared discursive conventions. It is important to note that this topic is not exactly typical of *DK* or its most popular diaries. *DK* is an overtly political blog that tends mostly to cover elections, congressional activity, and public debates more directly associated with politics. Even the diary’s title implies that the typical member of the *DK* audience might have missed the #Gamergate controversy, since it arises out of pop cultural entertainment and circulates in other public spheres on the internet. Thus, this blog says a lot about how

the *DK* audience perceives itself as a public—and how an author might present an issue that could be viewed as beyond the purview of this public’s concerns. Indeed, “sideboth” provides enough context so that his/her readers can understand #Gamergate, while also showing its exigency for the *DK*’s politically-oriented audience. The diary also considers what #Gamergate might mean for the *DK* community and the way that members treat one another in discourse. Toward the end of the diary, “sideboth” claims that the sort of white male privilege that characterizes #Gamergate also exists on *DK*. The author relates the “growing unease” of white males in an increasingly diverse culture to issues recognizable to the *DK* audience: “You saw it when Obama was elected. You see it when discussing immigration reform. Heck, you see it on this website when talking about white privilege” (n.p.). Here the author issues a challenge to the audience: not only should they care enough about this issue to try to understand it, but they should also examine its impact on their own community and in their own lives.

The ensuing comments section is a dynamic and complicated discussion of male privilege, misogyny, and the role of women in gaming. Beneath that, it is a portrait of one public reasoning and arguing about another public. Many of the comments attempt to describe, define or defend the notion of “gamers” as a public and as an identity, either pointing out the fallacy inherent in associating such a multitudinous group as gamers with a particularly vocal (and harmful) subset of that group, or arguing that it is impossible to dissociate the vocal few from the silent many. Several commenters speak from their own experiences as part of the gaming community, using their membership in one public to inform their participation in another. For example, member “rbutters” remarks that “‘Gamers’ is a word that represents a massive, hugely dynamic, global community.

You'd think they were all misogynistic American republicans by the tone and content of many comments, let alone this ridiculous diary" (n.p.). This comment represents a general trend in the discussion: that "sideboth's" diary generalizes about gamers as a public and makes indefensible accusations without backing them up logically.

Interestingly, much of the opposition to the original diary seems to take this form, dismissing "sideboth's" concerns about white male privilege by citing a lack of evidence. This would almost seem to affirm "sideboth's" original claim—that members of the *DK* audience get defensive when discussing male privilege. This also shows the capacity for members of the *DK* audience to question, critique, and possibly even delegitimize an author's original post.

Yet the conversation does not devolve into dogma, as there are plenty of perspectives that challenge or complicate those who would dismiss the diary for generalizations about the gaming community. For example, Figure G shows one of the most recommended comments (with 26 recommendations). User "CenPhx" asks, "Why do we have to first make sure that we aren't hurting male gamers by someone mistakenly lumping them in with this violent group before we can address the real and prevalent horrible stuff that is happening to far too many women in gaming and with far too much frequency?" ("CenPhx" n.p.).

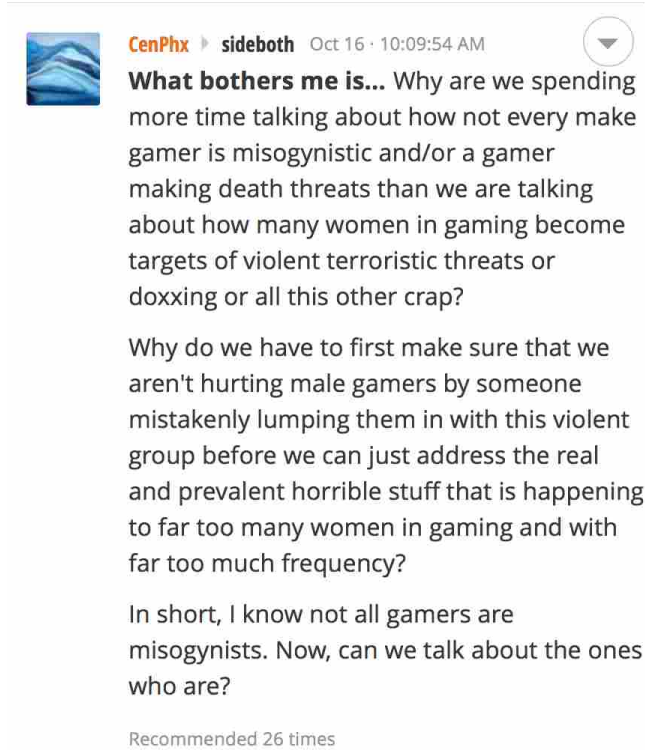


Figure G: Comment from user “CenPhx” to user “Sideboth.”

This commenter essentially asks fellow interlocutors to reexamine the true exigencies of this debate; s/he wants to re-orient the discussion around the fact that women are frequently hurt or threatened within the gaming community. This sets the discussion against a universal standard—while a universal audience may not show such concern for whether the gaming community had been accurately defined, it probably would show concern for the well-being and safety of women. “CenPhx” claims that the question of whether or not the diary generalizes about gamers is not at-issue, asserting “I know not all gamers are misogynists. Now, can we talk about the ones who are?” (n.p.). This comment is doing the “metapragmatic work” so important to a functional and inclusive public (Warner 12). It takes a deliberate step back from the content of the discussion to comment upon whether or not the discussion is meeting the needs of the entire constituency.

Meaning-making is collaborative on *Daily Kos*, where audiences function as authors and vice-versa. No diary or post is written in isolation from social or political context, not least because the comments section functions to develop and explore the concepts presented in the diary. While a member can write as many diaries as she wants about any topic she desires, her ideas will not reach full potential until they make contact with the community of minds on *DK*. As in the example above, diaries are the starting point for meaningful discussion, where members of the audience work to complicate and expand upon the ideas in the original post by contributing their own ideas and experiences. Diary authors routinely participate in discussions of their own posts, as well. Unlike *NYT* and similar outlets, the author on *DK* is not separate from the discussion that ensues in response to their work. This suggests that in digital spaces, authorship as a concept can expand to make room for collaborative reasoning. On *DK*, successful authorship is inextricably linked with meaningful audience membership.

The notion of authorship continues to mutate as we examine the third and final blog platform, *Reddit*. Here the social imperative informs every aspect of the site's structure and functionality. *Reddit* is essentially a platform designed to facilitate the formation of publics. Rather than constituting a public sphere in and of itself, *Reddit* hosts countless social communities that form under "subreddits." Subreddits are categories of shared interest, formed and moderated by *Reddit* users, that provide a space for people to discuss and post about a shared topic. Subreddits are seemingly infinite in their number, range, and scope. There are subreddits (titled with an "/r/" prefix indicating *Reddit* as the host site) that cover virtually any imaginable topic, ranging in title from /r/politics to /r/writing prompts to /r/oddlysatisfying (subtitle: a place to share those

things that oddly satisfy you). Any attempt to exhaustively categorize or characterize all parts of the larger *Reddit* community would be futile, since there are hundreds of thousands of subreddits—according to redditmetrics.com, there were 340,610 subreddits listed on January 3, 2014 (“subreddits” n.p.). It would also prove impossible to accurately summarize the purpose or functional of all subreddits, since they range so widely in purpose and regulation. For example, some subreddits are strictly for sharing particular kinds of images or stories found via other sources, while others require original content. Other subreddits are designed for people to ask particular types of questions ([/r/AskHistorians](http://r/AskHistorians), [/r/nostupidquestions](http://r/nostupidquestions)), or provide space for people to share specific information with one another ([/r/blunderyears](http://r/blunderyears) has the subtitle “Blunder Years: pictures from a regrettable past,” where users share embarrassing pictures from their youth) (n.p.). Other subreddits are much more general, focusing on larger topics like movies, food, or social movements like feminism. It becomes clear than no single subreddit is intended to encapsulate a *Reddit* user’s (also known as “redditor’s) experience, but that each redditor comprises her own set of subreddits that covers her interests. Redditors can subscribe to any number of subreddits, so that one Redditor’s experience of the site might be entirely different from another’s.

Although the structure of *Reddit* allows for an infinitely variant experience of the site, it still comprises a relatively unified community of users. For instance, the “front page” of the website (which calls itself “The Front Page of the Internet”) ranks *Reddit*’s most popular posts regardless of subreddit. As mentioned above, Redditors “upvote” appealing posts. The site then lists posts in order of popularity, with the top 25 appearing on the front page. The posts on the front page usually have upwards of 2,000 upvotes.

This means that a popular post within a subreddit has the potential to reach the much wider audience of *Reddit*'s front page—the universal audience to the particular audience of a given subreddit. Thus, any user that hopes to have her post voted to the front page cannot disregard the larger *Reddit* community; her post must appeal to the particular audience of the subreddit, but to reach the universal audience it must show a wider appeal.

A Redditor must demonstrate understanding of the guidelines governing a given subreddit, as well as the conventions of the larger *Reddit* community. *Reddit* is deliberate in establishing this relatively stringent set of conventions on a page titled “Reddiquette.” This title is significant in itself—this is an etiquette rather than a list of rules, suggesting that *Reddit* functions based on social contract rather than hard-and-fast rules. The introduction to the page affirms this, stating that “Reddiquette is an *informal* expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves. Please abide by it the best you can” (“Reddiquette” n.p, emphasis original). Much of the site’s metacommentary reinforces the idea that *Reddit* and its conventions have been constructed by fellow members of the *Reddit* community, so that following these conventions signals mutual respect rather than submission to rules imposed by an outside force. Indeed, many of the guidelines listed on the “Reddiquette” page aim to maintain a respectful community, a safe space for open dialogue. The page is split into the two basic categories of “Please Do” and “Please Don’t,” and the first guideline under “Please Do” is to “Remember the Human” behind the anonymized computer screen (n.p.). Already we see the socially based commitment to respectful dialogue that platforms like YouTube might be said to lack. *Reddit* asks its users to bring compassion to their interactions

online, acknowledging that while those interactions might be anonymous to a degree, they are still based upon contact between members of a human community.

The “Reddiquette” pages demonstrates *Reddit*’s commitment to productive dialogue. Most of its guidelines pertain to the maintenance of a safe, genuine, and thoughtful discursive space. Many of items listed under “Please Don’t” aim to prevent trolling or spamming, so that *Reddit* can continue to run smoothly even with millions of users visiting the page each day. Other guidelines show that the ultimate goal of *Reddit* is to facilitate discussion and the exchange of ideas on a given topic. For example, the page asks Redditors never to “Be (intentionally) rude at all,” since “By choosing not to be rude, you increase the overall civility of the community ad make it better for all of us” (n.p.). The page also contains suggestions for making productive contributions to the discussion, rather than posting items or comments that do not add anything to the conversation. In other words, the “Reddiquette” page helps to manage and regulate an enormous, multitudinous, and largely anonymous discourse community, constructing standards so that productive conversation is possible. The page functions not by imposing a list of mandates, but by presenting a set of principles that represents the needs of the *Reddit* constituency. It can do this only by adapting as the *Reddit* community expands. Indeed, “Reddiquette” also suggest that users revisit the page often, as it is “a living, breathing, working document which many change over time as the community faces new problems in its growth” (n.p.). The “Reddiquette” page ensures that the community can establish contact of minds, even as the constituency of Redditors continues to morph and evolve.

I will now conduct a reading of the subreddit /r/feminism, to get a closer look at how a particular community pursues its own goals while adhering to the standards of *Reddit* writ large. First, a note about feminism and its status within the social dynamic of *Reddit*: Redditors have often been characterized as a predominately masculine group. As opposed to an online community like *Tumblr*, which has been more directly associated with and welcoming to a feminine and/or queer membership, *Reddit* has a bit of a reputation as a space that does not overtly challenge the phenomenon of white male privilege and may be hostile toward social movements like feminism. These are, of course, sweeping generalizations about a site where it proves nearly impossible to make generalizations, since *Reddit* is host to millions of users who cannot be lumped into a single group or attitude. However, it does speak to some extent to the perception of *Reddit* as a public—and there is data to show that this may not simply be an outward perception, but a self-perception as well. For example, the subreddit /r/feminism hosts 42,367 subscribers, and /r/transgender has 15,510 subscribers. The subreddit /r/MensRights, on the other hand, boasts 100,673 subscribers, and a subreddit called /r/TheRedPill, which advocates “accepting reality for what it is, despite social convention or political correctness” while advising subscribers on “how to live as a man in an era of feminism,” has 83,167 subscribers (“subreddits” n.p.). Both sites equate feminism with misandry; the Men’s Rights Movement on its front claims to support the rights of men, but has often been known to actively oppose feminism by accusing feminists of blaming all the world’s problems on white men (and thus attempting to protect white male privilege). These statistics, like all statistics, are at least somewhat misleading—someone who subscribes to a subreddit may not advocate the subreddit’s views, or even visit the

subreddit at all. Clearly joining a Men's Rights subreddit does not mean that an individual is hostile to feminists (in all cases). However, these numbers do provide a snapshot of the attention these two groups receive on *Reddit*. That the Men's Rights groups have double or even triple the amount of subscribers on the feminist or transgender pages would suggest that the Men's Right's cause is more popular within the *Reddit* community—or at least that it draws more attention.

What this might also suggest is that /r/feminism and similar groups function as counterpublics on *Reddit*. The “General Rules” section on /r/feminism affirms this: the first “Main Content” rule states that “Discussions in this subreddit will assume the validity of feminism's existence, its egalitarian aspect, and the necessity of feminism's continued existence. The whys and wherefores are open for debate, but debate about the fundamental validity of feminism is off-topic and should be had elsewhere” (“/r/feminism FAQ”, n.p.). This community must assert that the validity of its core values should not be questioned. The fact that such a fundamental request appears as the very first of the main rule would suggest that members of /r/feminism must actively carve out a space to discuss their views without having them questioned by people outside the community. The FAQ page also addresses Mens' Rights activists (MRAs) directly, requesting that people wishing to discuss the validity of feminism should do target their questions at a sister subreddit, /r/AskFeminists. In fact, this subreddit was created by one of the /r/feminism moderators in order to handle the influx of questions and arguments coming from MRAs and other Redditors outside the feminism community, so that /r/feminism could remain devoted to the discussion of feminism, rather than having constantly to defend it. An announcement written by one of the /r/feminism moderators about the

creation of the new /r/AskFeminists subreddit places this concern in terms the larger *Reddit* community can understand: “As a redditor, I place it as a priority that everyone’s voices should be heard, and the best ideas should triumph in a free marketplace of ideas and discussion. But as a moderator, I hope to keep this subreddit on-topic and relevant, and maintain this as a space where feminists can connect and discuss with each other about feminism” (“FAQ” n.p.). This phrasing shows that the goal of /r/feminism are no different than any other subreddit’s: it serves as a space where people can come to discuss a shared interest without having to defend or justify said topic. Yet this excerpt also suggests that feminism is a contested subject on *Reddit*, that members of /r/feminism must actively work to “maintain [it] as a space” amid pressure and aggression from outside forces. In this sense, /r/feminism is a counterpublic that functions both within and outside the constraints of the larger *Reddit* community.

The fact that /r/feminism and its sister subreddit /r/AskFeminists operate as a contested counterpublics on *Reddit* impacts the community’s conception of its audience. Indeed, the decision to create a forum for questions about feminism ensures that /r/feminism is meeting the needs of its particular audience, rather than having to appeal to the larger (if not universal) audience of *Reddit*. The creation of /r/AskFeminists means that speakers in /r/feminism should no longer have to worry that their post will be questioned or attacked by a reader who does not share in the value system of /r/feminism. However, this does not mean that /r/feminism lacks dissent or that no member of the community is willing to challenge another. The post that I will examine, titled “Why it’s called ‘feminism’ and not ‘equalism’ (and why ‘equalism’ isn’t enough)” and posted to /r/feminism on November 13, 2014 by Redditor “just190,” contains a lively and

thoughtful debate on the continued relevance of the word “feminism” in the current social climate. In this discussion, the audience intervenes meaningfully, engaging in direct dialogue with the post’s author to challenge and unpack her ideas. This suggests that it may not be appropriate to call the “audience” on *Reddit* an audience at all—here the roles of audience and author are nearly interchangeable.

The very structure of discourse on /r/feminism grants the audience a profound sense of agency. Firstly, *Reddit* operates by giving the audience the power to upvote or downvote content that appeals or does not appeal to its audience. An unsuccessful post may not remain visible for long on the front page of a given subreddit if it does not garner many upvotes. As on *Daily Kos*, the audience has the ability to determine what content is visible and what content fades into the background. Before moving into a reading of the post, however, it is necessary to make a quick clarification: not all posts on *Reddit* are aimed at generating discourse. Some posts simply share pertinent information, links, or other items of interest to the community in a given subreddit. While these sorts of posts may not garner many comments, they do make for a diverse, layered, and intertextual experience for the reader. Furthermore, these sorts of posts still constitute appeals for the reader’s attention—the Redditor must understand the needs and interests of its audience to make a successful and visible post.

The audience’s autonomy persists into posts’ comment sections. The post mentioned above, with 178 upvotes, takes up an exigency within the feminist community, examining the core differences between the terms “feminism” and “equalism,” arguing in five short paragraphs that the term “equalism” cannot account for the historical and persistent disadvantages experienced by women in particular. The post expresses

frustration with a continuing need to defend feminism as a term. As we have seen, feminism is a contested term on *Reddit* and /r/feminism as a counterpublic must constantly justify its existence and use value. This post is therefore somewhat of an airing of grievances—it deals openly with the frustrations and anger that /r/feminism feels as a counterpublic. The post, depicted in Figure H below, paraphrases the typical sorts of arguments that members of the feminist community face. Redditor “just190” writes, “I’m really fed up with people telling me they aren’t feminists but instead ‘equalists’ or bringing up examples of how men deal with gender stereotypes as if to say ‘See? This is happening to men too. Why are women the only ones getting special treatment?’” (n.p.).

[Why it's called "feminism" and not "equalism" \(and why "equalism" isn't enough\)](#) [101/Introductory] (self:Feminism)
submitted 1 year ago by just190

I'm really fed up with people telling me they aren't feminists but instead "equalists," or bringing up examples of how men deal with gender stereotypes as if to say, "See? This is happening to men too. Why are women the only ones getting special treatment?"

It's called feminism because the existing gender disparities throughout the entire world have disproportionately negative consequences for WOMEN and it's important that the general populous understands that. And so, feminists like myself, we don't want you to forget that. We don't want our struggle to be diluted by mixing it in with the big bag of people's problems in the world. We want this to be personal. Why? Because that makes it a lot harder to ignore. And we want you to confront that ignorance up front. The reality is, to really give a shit about any social cause, it needs to be personal. You can't just say you care about equality for all and world peace or whatever.

You need to say, it's wrong that women are catcalled and objectified on their walks to work. It's wrong that african americans and hispanics are much more likely to be stopped and frisked by police than caucasians. It's wrong that a sixteen year old can be tried as an adult and end up spending their entire life in prison for a crime they didn't even commit. It's wrong that two people in love are denied the right to marry in most of the world because of their sexual orientation, and it's wrong that transgender individuals still do not feel welcomed in our society.

If your response to racial inequality is, well white people are still not very respected in the rap/hip-hop community, or if your response to marriage inequality is, well for straight people it's not very acceptable to just be life partners, or if your response to gender inequality is, well men are unfairly forced to be masculine all the time, you've missed the entire point. This, whatever it is, is not about you. It's not about your "group," whatever that may be, also having difficulties. It's about understanding someone else, or another "group" and their struggles. So next time somebody brings up one of these issues, recognize your impulsive defensiveness and resist the urge to make it about yourself and your problems. Don't belittle these causes by trying to disprove them or suggest that everyone suffers the same way. Don't tune them out so you can stir up a great response that will shut them down. NO. Please just shut your mouth and listen.

Figure H: Post by user “just190” to /r/Feminism

The post goes on to unpack the implications behind this approach, arguing that one should not dismiss the suffering of another group on the basis that one’s own group also undergoes suffering. Along with characterizing the sorts of arguments coming from

people outside the feminist community, the post is at times addressed to people that advocate those perspectives: “It’s not about your ‘group,’ whatever that may be, also having difficulties...So next time someone brings up one of these issues, recognize your impulsive defensiveness and resists the urge to make it about yourself” (n.p.). It is significant that this post is addressed to /r/feminism, rather than /r/AskReddit, which is more explicitly geared at opening dialogue with people skeptical of feminism. While the post’s “you” implies a “you” outside the feminist community, it is not actually intended to address those who might advocate “equalism” or question the fundamentals of feminism. Rather, the post models a response to typical arguments, gearing it toward those who consider themselves part of /r/feminism. The post submits this model in part as an expression of frustration, assuming that the audience likely shares this frustration. Yet it also puts the model forth for critique, sharing it with the audience in the hopes that they will either corroborate or challenge its approach in the comments.

The ensuing dialogue ends up critiquing the argumentative model in the original post, demonstrating the capacity for the *Reddit* audience to significantly complicate an author’s ideas while still granting it visibility in the form of upvotes. The comments section on *Reddit* functions as a sort of hybrid between *Daily Kos* and the *New York Times* comments sections: readers can upvote or downvote comments, as on *DK*, but those upvotes can bump the comments up or down in the overall sequence of comments, similarly to the hierarchical nature of comments on *NYT*. However, on *Reddit* the reader has the ability to choose the sequence by which the comments are presented: the reader can sort comments by “best,” “new,” “controversial,” and so on (n.p.). The comments with the most upvotes are considered “best,” though it is not entirely clear what

constitutes a “controversial” comment. What is clear is that *Reddit* makes it possible for readers to structure the discussion in several different ways, according to their own priorities and interests. This means that discussions on *Reddit* do not always take place sequentially, but instead are layered and multidimensional. As on *DK*, there might be several instances of dialogue happening simultaneously, each addressing a different angle of a shared issue. Ultimately, the discussion in the comments has the potential to be much more complex and productive than the content of the original post.

More than any of the blog platforms examined in this chapter, discussions on *Reddit* unfold as complex dialogue between author and audience. In the current post, members of the audience take issue with specific aspects of the original post, which the author then jumps in to address. For example, Figure I shows a response from Redditor “Emperor_Panda,” who writes: “I really liked this post, but there was one part I wish to examine: ‘We don’t want our struggle to be diluted by mixing it in with the big bag of people’s problems in the world.’ I don’t think it’s possible to divide feminism from other aspects of power” (n.p.).

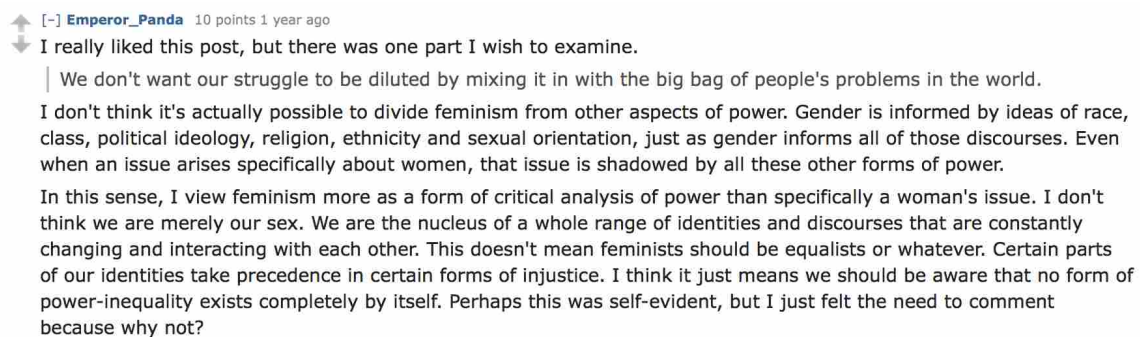


Figure I: Comment by user “Emperor_Panda” in response to “just190” on /r/Feminism.

This comment challenges one of the core claims in the original post, quoting a problematic line and unpacking it to see whether or not it fits with the community’s

conception of feminism. “Emperor_Panda” goes on to say that “I view feminism more as a form of critical analysis of power than specifically a woman’s issue,” suggesting that “just190’s” understanding of feminism might diverge from other, potentially more appropriate definitions of the concept. “just190” replies directly to this comment, clarifying that she had not meant to suggest “that these complex social issues cannot be tied to one another or to broader problems of the world, but that to fully understand anyone [sic] social issue you need to look at it in all its complexity” (n.p.). By responding to such comments, “just190” pushes her own reasoning further, collaborating with members of the community to better articulate her position. This raises the level of discourse and suggests that the audience’s input is just as important as the author’s original post.

This discussion is at its core an examination of /r/feminism’s conception of itself as a counterpublic. Much of the conversation centers on how the group understands its own philosophy and the way that feminists presents that philosophy to the world. For instance, one particularly insightful comment questions whether or not the original post affirms feminism’s most current understanding of itself. Redditor “Hideyoshi_Toyotomi” comments that the post is “very reflective of second-wave feminism” as opposed to third-wave feminism, claiming that “the fundamental assertion of feminism to me is that our world is full of injustice and the cause of feminism is the reduction of injustice” (n.p.). This characterization inherently critiques the original post, suggesting that feminism should focus on the historical and social contexts of power that disadvantage women, people of color, and people of lower financial status alike. It also comments upon what it means to call oneself a feminist, and the comments that follow

continue to debate whether the priority of feminism should be to seek equality for everyone, or to expose the rampant disadvantages faced by women in particular. Redditor “Lintheru,” a self-described “[guy] that tries to act like a feminist, but never [calls] myself a feminist,” faces this issue head-on: “There are times when focusing narrowly on improving rights and conditions for one cultural group will worsen conditions for another group” (n.p.). It would appear that “Lintheru” is interested in issues of feminism but does not profess membership to its community. His post, similarly to the ones characterized by the original post, goes on to claim that it is “against the feminist cause to ignore or worsen the well-being of males” (n.p.). The ensuing comments respond by reminding “Lintheru” that championing the causes of women and men need not be mutually exclusive endeavors. While the comments assert that women may need more direct intervention in order to achieve the same level of advantages that men already possess, but they do so by placing this project in the context of gender equality at large. For instance, Redditor “edubz” writes that expectations for masculinity are equally harmful to both women and men: “the oppressive aspects of masculinity... hold men and women down” (n.p.). Thus, this conversation demonstrates how /r/feminism can function simultaneously as a public and as a counterpublic. While the intended audience clearly shares an interest in pursuing the goals of feminism, the inclusion of outside voices within this community enables the group to clearly articulate its goals.

These case studies affirm what we already know about successful rhetorical action: that it relies on genuine and meaningful commitment by each participant to in a community of minds. The readers and writers on *The New York Times*, *Daily Kos*, and

Reddit form publics based on the same fundamentals upon which publics have always formed. That is, they establish contact of minds by extending appeals to an audience with shared concerns, on the assumption that the audience will take the appeal at face value and grant it their full and honest attention. Argumentation, digital or not, can occur only when “a person [attaches] some importance to gaining the adherence of his interlocutor” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 16). Yet the conditions of digital discourse make it that much more difficult for argumentation to meet these standards, so that it is all that much more profound when digital argumentation succeeds. As we see in “thorawayfeminism’s” failed appeals in the introduction to this chapter, the anonymous and casual nature of digital space makes it that much easier for people to talk past one another, to set up artificial appeals meant simply to provoke controversy rather than to garner assent.

The instances of successful argumentation examined above arise from the social and intellectual commitment made by each interlocutor to understand and respect the interests and goals of the group. Once again, this standard is no different from the standards of any discourse community. However, it is remarkable that digital communities establish contact of minds given the relative constraints of anonymity, which leads to the lack of accountability so often associated with digital argumentation. The global and universal aspects of digital discourse are both blessing and curse; while these factors make it possible for people who may never have met to establish contact of minds, they also make it more difficult for interlocutors to reach the argumentative standards required for productive discourse. The case studies above demonstrate that meaningful, thoughtful, and intellectually rigorous communities arise only when

members of the community transcend anonymity, rather than embracing it. Anonymity can breed disrespect, discursive irresponsibility, and even hatred (as we see on several online platforms like *YouTube*, *4Chan*, and other spaces). Yet it is possible for communities to form even within the constraints of anonymity, essentially by eradicating anonymity all together. In communities like */r/feminism* or *Daily Kos*, members understand the needs and goals of the group, taking the time to establish guidelines for mutually respectful discourse. This argumentative spaces are no longer anonymous, since each speaker holds the other accountable for meeting the needs of the audience. Only when the audience and the speaker come together to form an agreement on how discourse will proceed can true argumentation occur in digital space.

Notes:

ⁱ The owner of Daily Kos, Markos Moulitsas (known more commonly by his username “Kos,”) extends these perspectives in light of the inimical discourse surrounding the 2016 election in a post titled “The new, updated, and improved Daily Kos rules of the road.” The post reminds users of the basic goals for this site, as well as adding new recommendations for productive and respectful dialogue.

CHAPTER III

THE RHETORIC OF SHARING: FACEBOOK, ARGUMENTATION, AND THE REMEDICATION OF THE SOCIAL

“Founded in 2004, Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.”

—Facebook Mission Statement (“About,” n.p.)

“People want to share and stay connected with their friends and the people around them. If we give people control over what they share, they will want to share more. If people share more, the world will become more open and connected. And a world that's more open and connected is a better world.”

— Mark Zuckerberg (“Answering Privacy Concerns,” n.p.).

Social networking sites (SNS) are a central component of the digital media ecology. “Sharing” is the key imperative on SNSs such as Facebook, where people contribute information to form a personal profile, post photos and articles, and make updates about their lives. The idea of sharing is a complex one, not only on the SNS but in interpersonal connections at large. “Sharing” means to divide something evenly among members of a group. It means allowing another person to use a personal belonging or resource, as when a child shares her toy or food with a friend. It evens mean taking part or participating in something. In all its forms and usages, sharing carries an association with generosity and mutual goodwill. To share is to reach out to another, to find common ground and common strength. These basic roots remain even as definitions of sharing become more abstract. While usage of the word “sharing” to imply equal division of

resources dates back to early in the fourteenth century, more recently sharing has come to entail the divulging of personal detail or narrative¹. Sharing can now mean to offer aspects of yourself to another to form a mutual bond of friendship and intimacy.

Perhaps the dominant usages for “sharing” evolve along with the shift from an industrial to an information economy. Now that information is a primary commodity, it is fitting that the sharing of information should become a predominant mode of social and economic development. Indeed, the SNS giant Facebook (FB) adopts “sharing” as its corporate ethos, keying into centuries’ worth of sharing’s social and cultural resonance to create a new way to share— and a new way to profit from the act of sharing. On FB, people “share” whole hosts of data, photos, and personal information with other SNS users. In this context, sharing refers to the disclosure of personal details and narratives, as when people post status updates about their lives. Yet SNS users also “share” when they post an article or photo from another website. This usage falls somewhere between the disclosure of personal details and the equal division of resources: people post photos or articles that may have personal resonance for them, so that others can share in the experience of reading or viewing it. Shared information acts at once as personal detail and public commodity: sharing on FB can constitute intimate exchange between members of a community, while simultaneously providing trackable, salable data for FB and other corporations.

FB plays upon this double meaning of sharing in its promotional materials, building the ethos of sharing into the structure of the website and employing it as a marketing tool. The excerpts that open this chapter demonstrate the centrality of sharing to FB’s corporate image. The social network, with CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg at

the helm, portrays itself as a service that “[gives] people the power to share” in order to “stay connected.” The statements above repeat those key terms— “share,” “power,” “connected,” “open”— promoting the free exchange of information on a global scale. Here, sharing becomes a method of gathering social capital in order to attain FB’s ultimate commodity: connectivity. The mission statement and excerpt from Zuckerberg invest sharing with great power: the power to belong to communities both global and local, to express individuality while forging connections across time and space.

The statements above also reveal FB’s potentially problematic approach to information itself.ⁱⁱ According to Zuckerberg’s statement, when people share information freely with one another the world becomes both “open” and “connected.” Information generates both transparency and social exchange. Zuckerberg goes on to suggest that sharing leads to an “open and connected world,” and that “a world that’s more open and connected is a better world.” This rests upon the assumption that information, shared freely, improves the world. While his language at first suggests that *people* want to share information, the passage also implies that the exchange of information is itself an inherent good.

Zuckerberg insinuates that information is valuable solely by virtue of *being* information, that its very existence invites sharing and that any exchange of information is good and worthwhile. Michael Zimmer, scholar in information ethics, privacy, and new media, takes Zuckerberg’s logic even further, summing it up with a single sentence: “Information wants to be shared” (“Mark Zuckerberg’s Theory of Privacy,” n.p.). Indeed, Zimmer and other readers may detect a technologically determinist strain in Zuckerberg’s thinking: the excerpts above presume that information technologies will build a

transparent and connected society, as long as they can operate unimpeded.ⁱⁱⁱ This locates agency not in the human user, but in information and the technologies that disperse it. This distinction is especially important in the context of the public backlash against FB's privacy standards and the lack of transparency about privacy overall. The very idea of privacy is at odds with the utopian view of sharing Zuckerberg sets out in the second passage, which responds directly to accusations about mishandling of privacy issues. The passage intimates that control over information, even for reasons of privacy, is an obstacle to a "better world" where information is shared freely and without constraint. Zuckerberg's language contains a contradiction: it promises the Facebook user control over the information she shares and whom she shares it with, while also implying that the open exchange of information is itself the point.

The excerpts exhibit the latent assumption that more information is better, coupled with Zuckerberg's insistence that people ultimately have control over how and what they share. Indeed, the mission statement proclaims that "Facebook's mission is to *give people the power to share*" (emphasis added). In this portrayal, FB is simply a tool that facilitates information exchange. The FB corporation has an interest in maintaining the appearance of benign neutrality, encouraging people to share generously and without concern for privacy. After all, more information *is* better for FB, because users' information is a commodity that FB can use to generate profit. The user may not have as much control as Zuckerberg would like to suggest, however. Although the user enters willingly into an exchange where personal information "buys" connectivity, FB's appearance as a benign technology often masks the reality that people do not always know what happens to their information once they have posted it. Michael Zimmer notes

that while FB promotes “control” as a solution to privacy issues, it becomes more and more difficult to track FB’s usage of its members’ information. Though Zuckerberg insists that users have control over what they post and who can view it, “default settings lean toward making information public, and new advertising and third-party platforms are increasingly spreading users’ information beyond their direct control” (Zimmer n.p.). Users often do not realize how much of their information becomes public when they submit it to FB, largely because the platform is designed to obscure this. Recognizing the dissonance between FB’s apparent neutrality and its actual motivations is key to any understanding of the SNS.

“Sharing” comes to encapsulate this complex socioeconomic exchange between individuals, technologies, and corporations. The lack of transparency surrounding these exchanges is undeniably troubling. But the significant problems inherent in a platform like FB do not preclude it from being a dynamic site for rhetorical exchange. Indeed, sharing is the rhetorical model from which users’ interactions proceed on the SNS. In essence, people exchange information for connectivity. Sharing is the governing mentality driving discursive exchange on FB: it is an agreement that SNS users enter into, which combines deeply held social beliefs with newer conceptions of the cultural value of information. Sharing on SNSs combines the sense of generosity associated with revealing aspects oneself to others with the goal of accumulating social capital. This operates on the logic that the more a user shares, the more connectivity she receives in the form of interactions with other users and increased visibility on social and digital networks. The rhetorical imperative of sharing proves compelling: every day, people pour data about themselves, their lives, and the things they care about into social networks.

They document themselves, avidly and quite publicly: it is clear that some are willing to sacrifice aspects of their privacy in order to connect digitally with other people in their lives.

Some of this participation doubtlessly arises from the darker side of the imperative to stay connected: the fear of being left out. Indeed, sharing doubles as a way to demonstrate social status, to enact and display social ties by accruing “likes” and friends on the network. The public nature of the site means that most FB interactions are visible to other users: others can read comments, view photos, and peruse contact lists (depending on privacy settings). Thus *visibility*, or lack thereof, becomes integral to FB’s brand of sociality. Media scholar Taina Bucher has argued that FB’s “algorithmic architectures dynamically constitute certain forms of social practice around the pursuit of visibility,” which leads inevitably to what Bucher calls the “threat of invisibility” (1165). FB creates an atmosphere where to be visible is to connect, to matter, to have a place in a vast social network of colleagues, family, and friends. Sharing can be a response to social pressure in that helps users retain that all-important visibility. If a user does not share enough, she risks dropping out of sight.

While the above issues certainly complicate any analysis of sharing and preclude a wholly optimistic view, they do not nullify the rhetorical force behind sharing. Much of the public discourse around social networking seeks either to tout it as the realization of Marshall McLuhan’s global village, or to condemn it as the harbinger of intellectual and ethical demise. We might ask whether sharing on social networks simply confirms the anxieties about attention span and argumentative integrity that we saw in the introductory chapter. We might consider whether it trivializes and cheapens users’ treatment of their

own information (and thus their privacy). We may question whether discursive exchange on FB is worthwhile at all, or if it is merely shallow, passive, lacking in any depth or consideration. Of course, the response to these questions echoes the response to any such lamentation about the ruinous impact of technology on the ability to think, to write, to negotiate relationships. That is: the answer is both “yes” and “no.”

It is the attitude of this project that while concerns such as the ones raised above are valid, it is more productive to think about them in terms of change and use value. Indeed, rather than asking whether sharing is good or bad, I would instead like to ask what people stand to gain from sharing in these spaces. What do they *do* when they share? How does a function like sharing change the approach to information, to sociality, to written argument? These questions are important in spite of— perhaps *because* of— the seemingly trivial nature of some information people choose to share on social networks. FB has grown infamous for glorifying the mundane. People share photos of pets, silly quiz results, what they had for lunch. Of course, for every instance of seemingly superfluous information there is an important article, a serious status update, or posting about a community event. Yet even in its most apparently trivial moments, FB seems to provide an important rhetorical outlet, a space for people to share themselves and to communally negotiate a diversity of issues, from the mundane to the profound.

This chapter will be especially concerned with the impact of sharing on sociality and argumentation in digital space. In order to confront and understand those impacts, we must define the term “sharing” in all its multiple meanings. Firstly, sharing means that participants display their original expressions such as photos, status updates, or blog posts. Secondly, it means that in social media, users “share” forms of expression taken

from others, posting articles, friends' status updates or photos, or links to websites to their own profile page. Thirdly, it means that participants (knowingly or unknowingly) share their personal information with corporate entities, such as social networks and data providers, to gain access to the social networks of their choosing (van Dijck 46).

These definitions show the complexity of what it means to share on the social networking site (SNS), but they may also raise the concern that social networks encourage people to share rather than to create. Platforms like Facebook encourage people to post and re-post articles or photos from other people, rather than necessarily contributing ideas of their own. An uncharitable view might be that sharing is about capturing (if not retaining) attention at any cost. This would suggest that the major imperative of Facebook is to garner as much attention as possible, without any consideration of content value. Although users' reasons for soliciting attention surely arise from motives more complicated than mere narcissism, there lies an important kernel of truth to this perspective. Garnering *attention*, the fundamental act of reaching out to another person, is a core aspect of what makes sharing so compelling and ubiquitous^{iv}. By sharing, the user essentially asks to be heard, to be acknowledged by fellow users. Aside from creating a profile (which also entails sharing personal information), sharing is the first step toward participation and belonging in a social network. In fact, people can participate *solely* by sharing. Sharing allows the user to enter the discourse; it is in fact the elemental rhetorical action of social networks, since it is the vehicle by which attention, and eventually argument, is exchanged.

When a user signs up with Facebook, she consents to take part in the socio-technical processes set forth by the platform. She agrees to use FB's language and

technological systems to mediate her social interactions in the digital realm. Sharing, in all its multiple and interrelated senses, is the core mechanism by which this mediation takes place. It is a complex process that authorizes users as speaking subjects in digital space.^v First, the individual must submit basic personal information in order to join the network. The individual earns the right to speak (and to listen) by sharing information with a corporate media institution. Moreover, membership to a single SNS like Facebook often grants the user access to several other digital networks, by linking other sharing based websites to the social media account. These digital spaces rely on sharing to remain interconnected. Social networks like Facebook, as well as digital periodicals like *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *Jezebel*, and countless others, ask readers to “share” articles and posts with others. Media corporations use this as advertisement, of course, but the system also affords the user a modicum of control over the level of interconnectivity between information networks. For instance, if a user chooses to link her Facebook account to the *New York Times*, she can share articles and comment activity with friends and see what her friends have shared. Thus, the more actively a user shares, the more visible they become on vast digital networks.

We might see sharing as a sort of social contract, to which users must agree before they can issue an appeal in the public forum of the SNS. Sharing is a form of institutionalized language that initiates the speaker into a technological and corporate infrastructure, but it also takes the form of socially recognizable language that people use to address each other in their daily lives. The social network employs the culturally familiar concept of sharing to incorporate users into its system of socio-technical connectivity, which in turn creates a rhetorical space where people can interact with

others in the network. Maurice Charland, in his article “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois,” cites Louis Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation as a primary way that institutions and individuals create rhetorical situations. Following Althusser, Charland notes that the hail, or the moment that an institution or individual uses ideologically determined language to address another, creates the rhetorical situation (Charland 133-134). The hail, and the interlocutor’s response to it, thus generates the opportunity for discourse. The speaker, as an ideological subject, only gains access to the rhetorical situation by responding to the hail (Charland 138). This mirrors the process by which the SNS interpellates participants. The user answers to the “hail” of corporate entities like Facebook, which in turn provide a space for the public exchange of information and ideas.

The dual function of sharing begins as soon as a user creates an account with a social network. First, the subject responds to a corporation’s hail by submitting their information and displaying their identity. Once active, a major element of participation on a site like Facebook is for users to hail one another. Each time a participant shares another’s photo or addresses a friend in the social network, they draw fellow users into the rhetorical situation, constituting them as speaking subjects as well. Here we encounter the multivalent meaning of “sharing” once again, which reveals the reciprocity of the process: individuals share information with corporations so they can share with others in the public spheres of their choosing.

Sharing constitutes subjects by initiating them into a rhetorical situation, affirming their status as speaking subjects. This means that the rhetoric of sharing is not merely persuasive, but depends also on identification between speakers^{vi}. As Maurice

Charland observes, Burke's theory of identification acknowledges that the cooperative use of language functions prior to persuasion. For Burke, the rhetorical situation begins at the moment of contact, when members of a dialogue use symbols to forge connection or discover shared interests. This does not simply imply communication between two individuals; rather, identification is a complex instance of subject formation, defining the subject as both similar to and separate from her interlocutor. In identification a speaker becomes " 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (Burke 20-21). Charland, following Burke, submits identification, rather than persuasion, as the primary mode of connection in a rhetorical situation. Indeed, taking persuasion as rhetoric's fundamental concept "implies the existence of an agent who is free to be persuaded" (Charland 133). Both Burke and Charland find this implication problematic, since it assumes a "transcendent subject as audience member, who would exist prior to and apart from the speech to be judged" (133). Identification, on the other hand, posits that our very use of speech relies on the status of each participant as an ideologically determined subject—one could not speak, or listen, otherwise. The theory insists that "the very existence of social subjects...is already a rhetorical effect," acknowledging that our very sense of ourselves as social beings arises from the rhetorical use of language to create connections between one another (133).

Sharing generates identification by way of rhetorical address. Charland, like Althusser before him, reminds that "the very act of *addressing* is rhetorical," suggesting that the subject must already be a member of a rhetorical situation to address another, let

alone persuade them (138, emphasis original). The identification of sharing takes place prior to persuasion; it puts texts and networks into conversation without necessarily using commentary or narrative to forge that connection. A single click of the “share” button functions as a complex form of address. It displays information, yet it also addresses other participants in the discursive space by asking them to acknowledge and engage with that information. By calling on one another to read texts, post photos, and share thoughts, users of the social network affirm for one another their status in the rhetorical situation. Sharing is a complex and continuous process of subject formation: Charland points out that “this rhetoric of identification is ongoing, not restricted to one hailing, but usually part of a rhetoric of socialization” (138). This means that addressor and addressee continually constitute one another through sustained use of language to generate identification. This recalls the role of sharing as social contract: people use sharing as tool within a mutually agreeable “rhetoric of socialization.” In other words, sharing is at once a pragmatic convention of digital interaction, and an intricate form of address that resonates with users’ sense of self and social identity.

Placing this much stock in the rhetorical potential of sharing may seem overzealous, since sharing simply requires that a user impart some form of information, be it a photo, a birthdate, or an article authored by someone else. Many if not most instances of sharing on Facebook do not require commentary, intervention, or even originality. Yet as we have seen in Chapter 1, the exchange of information is the fundamental action by which public spheres are formed. To repeat a key quotation: “a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity” (Warner 11-12). Sharing,

as a function, allows for this “circulation of texts,” which in turn allows discourse communities to emerge from within similar fields of interest. As we will see later in this discussion, sharing can be an inventive act, since it generates occasions for argumentation.

On the SNS, sharing is an argumentative act in and of itself. When one shares an article, a photo, or even a piece of personal information, one makes an appeal for the attention or response of a fellow user. In other words, one engages in meaningful rhetorical action by gearing a particular text toward an audience of fellow users in the hopes that they respond. In the vast system of interlocking social networks to which so many people now belong, sharing is not just the first step toward intervention in the discourse: it *is* intervention in the discourse. Sharing becomes both the means and the end of rhetorical action in digital spaces like Facebook. While users share information to reach out to others, they also share in order to express aspects of their own identity. Sharing at once functions as an interactive springboard for argumentation and an intertextual snapshot of a user’s digital identity. Through sharing, people are creating: creating their own unique tapestry of interests, motivations, and ideas.

This process does not take place apart from the technological and corporate entities that structure it. Instead there exists a give-and-take between the imperatives determined by the technological platform and the users that work with and against those imperatives. José van Dijck recognizes the reciprocity of the relationship between platform and user. Her work *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* notes that “It is a common fallacy...to think of platforms as merely *facilitating* networking activities; instead, the construction of platforms and social practices is

mutually constitutive” (6, emphasis original). Viewing the platform simply as a facilitator fails to acknowledge that the platform dictates, to some extent, the structure of the discourse taking place within it. By that same token, the platform is not immune to modification by the people engaging it. The technological platform and the human user must adapt to one another in order to maintain a functional relationship. This dynamic is not entirely equitable: the Facebook corporation wields considerably more power than the individual user when it comes to determining the platform’s infrastructure. Yet users find ways to affect change on the networks they use daily. van Dijck follows with Michel de Certeau’s assertion that “people use *tactics to negotiate* the strategies that are arranged for them by organizations or institutions” (van Dijck 6, emphasis original). So while Facebook as an institution may have ultimate control over the capabilities of its platform, the user is capable of manipulating that platform, of calling for change, or of abandoning it altogether. Indeed, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Mark Zuckerberg and the rest of Facebook’s corporate board had to answer users’ call for more privacy in order to meet the needs of Facebook members. Although those changes may have been in conflict with Facebook’s ethos of unrestrained sharing, the corporation had to make at least minimal changes or risk losses in membership. After all, FB and other social networks are ultimately *businesses* that must react to the needs of their customers to remain sustainable. While FB may hold openness and connectivity as one of its core values, it must also prioritize profit margins.

Mark Zuckerberg has managed to maintain both priorities with Facebook. van Dijck argues that Zuckerberg’s bid to make the world more connected works in tandem with the equally important—if less transparent—goal of “making online sociality

salable” (14, emphasis original). The Facebook corporation employs rhetoric that plays up connectivity and transparency, while playing down networking technology’s capacity to structure users’ social interactions (van Dijck 11-12). For instance, Facebook’s promotional materials claim that the network can “shape your experiences online and make them more social” (Hicks n.p.). By increasing connectivity between users and platforms, Facebook creates opportunities for social interactions across the web, but it also tracks those interactions for advertising purposes. van Dijck asserts that this type of discourse deliberately plays into the cyber-utopian attitudes associated with Web 2.0 in order to conceal its motives as a corporation^{vii} (van Dijck 11). van Dijck insists that we cannot disregard the significance of algorithms and other technological phenomena in web-based interactions: “Sociality coded by technology renders peoples’ activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people’s everyday routines” (12). A perfect example of this is Facebook’s “Like” button. A user can acknowledge someone else’s post by “liking” it— this allows a user to reach out to a friend, but it also allows the Facebook platform to track a user’s movements through the network and even to “create and steer specific needs” by showing more information that would appeal to the user based on their previous “likes” (12). The Facebook platform is designed to make users feel as though they are creating their own experiences and drawing their own connections as they interact with friends, but in truth the platform engineers many of these interactions by determining the visibility of certain information. Though this works in part to customize a user’s experience based on their interests and trends of usage, it also allows Facebook to maximize profitability by identifying information or products that might appeal to a particular user.

van Dijck is right to highlight the role of algorithm and data manipulation in the ways that people experience digital space. Her reservations resonate with a long-standing debate in the field of new media studies. Lev Manovich, in his seminal work *The Language of New Media*, recognizes similar implications in the conversion of media into binary code. Writing in 2001, three years prior to the founding of Facebook, Manovich expresses concern about the burgeoning reliance on computer technologies to mediate cultural information. He claims that once the computer is responsible for mediating all other forms of media, the computer's logic exceeds that of the human user. In order for the computer to perform actions or launch a piece of media, it begins a dialogue between computer files that is inaccessible to the user. This dialogue is remote from the nature of the media being displayed: "the dimensions of this dialog are not the image's content, meanings, or formal qualities, but rather file size, file type, type of compression used, file format, and so on. In short, these dimensions belong to the computer's own cosmogony rather than to human culture" (Manovich 45-46). For Manovich, human cognition is now subordinate to the computer processes that mediate cultural artifacts. Because digitization uses the same system of logic to represent all media forms, the cultural processes used to create the original media necessarily merge with the computer: "the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media," eventually resulting in a "blend of human and computer meanings" (46). Therefore, human cognition must rely to some degree on the machine's system of representation in a digital environment.

Similar fusions between machine and human action occur in social networks. The machine mediates the experience of sociality in digital space, generating the illusion of

organic connection when in truth the connection has been algorithmically engineered. The social network takes aspects of human sociality (“friends,” “sharing,” “liking”) and converts them into digital code. Like the cultural artifacts Manovich mentions above, interactions on social media get filtered through “the computer’s own cosmogony” (Manovich 46). For van Dijck, this means that those interactions come pre-packaged for sale to advertisers and other third parties that might profit from tracking users’ data. But even more than that, it means that much of what might count as “social,” community-driven interaction has actually been technologically engineered. van Dijck argues that Zuckerberg’s bid to “[make] the web social” actually means “making sociality technical” (12).

For these reasons, van Dijck replaces the term “social media” for her own phrase, “connective media.” In her view, what occurs in spaces like Facebook cannot truly be called “social,” because it is “the result of human input shaped by computed output and vice versa— a socio-technical ensemble whose components can hardly be told apart” (13-14). This perspective highlights the inseparability of technology from the interactions engendered by it, but it might also undermine the primacy of the human user and programmer. While van Dijck aptly points out the significant influence of technological structures on what users perceive as social interaction, it may be more productive to consider whether a different *kind* of sociality arises from the human-machine melange. On Lev Manovich’s view, interactions filtered through the machine are forever altered by the machine, but this alteration is not a one-way street. This is because the computer’s mechanisms are closely related to the culture from which they arise: “the computer layer and the cultural layer influence each other” so that “the result of this composite is a new

computer culture—a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world and the computer’s own means of representing it” (Manovich 46). This “new computer culture” impacts the ways people relate to information and to one another. It does not negate the role of the human, but rather extends and expands it.

Kate Hayles, in her book *My Mother was a Computer*, makes much of the continuing primacy of the human user in digital space. She, like Manovich and van Dijck, recognizes the role of digital code in mediating, translating, and even creating human meaning. Yet for Hayles the interactions *between* speech, writing, and code grant digital technologies their power. Code works along with human cognitive processes to create meaning in the world. People are never separate from the technologies they create, for “media effects, to have meaning and significance, must be located with an embodied human world” (Hayles 7). This approach counters van Dijck’s assertion that digitally-mediated social encounters are no longer truly social. While interactions on social networks differ from face-to-face encounters in key ways, they arise from social and cultural traditions that have meaning in both digital and physical realms.

People can have rewarding and connective interactions on social networks. In line with Hayles, users’ participation on social networks cannot be separated from lived experience. People *adapt* social networking technologies to the needs and desires that arise from embodied sociality. They also use social networks to extend their social experiences, reaching across boundaries of space and time to share with friends and family. Those connections may be tenuous at times, as when one “friends” an acquaintance from high school without engaging in meaningful exchange. Yet they often

yield real opportunities to socialize, using the same core practices that people use in face-to-face interactions: sharing pertinent photos, articles, or events, conversing via Facebook's comment function or Messenger app, and so on. Furthermore, people on social networks like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter often use the network to *supplement* a relationship that takes place mostly in-person. This means that a venue like Facebook provides a different kind of interaction, one that often works in tandem with face-to-face relationships.

Platforms like Facebook blend human social and interpretive practices with technological practices of tracking, ordering, and storing information. As we have seen, neither the machine's processes nor the human's practices exists in isolation from the other. This means that social networks produce interactions that can supplement a user's sense of social identity—but those interactions arise from and respond to constraints set in place by technological operations. Even the language of social networking is a complex adaptation arising from the interplay between technological structures and social practices. Facebook's "like," "share," and "friend" functions all mimic the types of social interactions that people have in daily life. This familiarity naturalizes the technological processes governing Facebook, while also concealing the true complexity of these interactions that take place not just between user to user, but also between user, corporation, and machine.

Sharing plays upon culturally resonant traditions associated with spoken utterance. We see references to spoken interaction all over Facebook. In the space where users update their status, Facebook asks "What's on your mind?" People can "comment" on each other's posts and "chat" using the instant messaging function. Facebook uses the

immediacy of the spoken word to encourage casual, spontaneous interactions between friends. Of course, these interactions are not spoken, but written. In a fundamental sense, the “utterances” of Facebook— status updates, shared media, comments on friends’ posts— function in the same ways and for the same purposes as spoken utterances. They address audiences, they reach out for a response, they seek *attention* from their listeners. It transforms utterance into a digital, multimodal form of address.

Even if these foundational motivations remain the same, a digital utterance differs in key ways from its spoken counterpart. For one, it is more lasting than a spoken utterance and can reach across time and space to be heard by an audience beyond those in the room. More to the point for this discussion, utterances on Facebook can manifest as hypertextual, media-rich expressions that layer a user’s words with links to other texts or people. For example, one can post a link to an article or a friend’s profile within the text of a comment. So while the comment can function on one level as a quick response to a friend’s post, working in largely the same way that a spoken utterance would, it also extends the utterance’s impact. It does so not only by making the utterance visible to more people for a longer period of time, but also by making the utterance inter- and hypertextual.

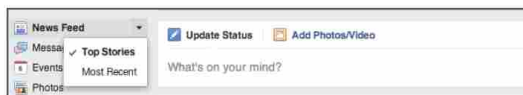
To put it briefly, Facebook remediates the spoken utterance. According to Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, authors of the influential text *Remediation*, remediation is “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 45). Their book details the rich history of this cultural practice, from the ekphrastic description of one piece of Medieval art in another, to the use of “windows” to make sense of multiple programs running on a computer’s interface. Facebook remediates the act of speech by asking

people to “chat,” to “share,” to “comment” on the site, hearkening to familiar social acts to make the site feel “intuitive” (Penny qtd in Bolter and Grusin 32). Digital utterances on a site like Facebook extend the capabilities of spoken communication while building from social tropes associated with speech.

To best understand how sharing remediates speech and fuses it with both digital and social practices, I will conduct a case study examining the multiple meanings of sharing on Facebook. An important caveat: it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to characterize the multivalent nature of sharing by examining any one example or set of examples. Sharing, in all its multiplicity, creates an *environment* of continual information flow that cannot be fully encapsulated in a single case study. Rather than attempting a comprehensive report on the sharing’s functionality in the social network, I will provide analysis of Facebook’s “News Feed,” along with two specific instances of sharing. The “News Feed” displays information that people have shared—photos, articles, status updates, and more. It appears as a constant stream of information without categorization or hierarchy, and it is a multimedia, hypertextual space where multiple kinds of sharing interact. The News Feed reveals the way that SNS users engage with shared information, demonstrating the ebb and flow, the fluid movement of information and social interaction in the networked space.

The News Feed is designed to appear non-hierarchical, but it relies heavily on technological tracking of users’ movements and “likes” to present information in a dynamic and appealing fashion. It is worth investigating how attention accumulates around some posts and not others. Facebook captures and disburses users’ attention, so that the kinds of attention paid to particular posts determines whether or not they are

visible on the News Feed at all. Taina Bucher studies the algorithms Facebook employs to create a dynamic (and salable) experience of the News Feed. In her examination of the platform, she notes the distinction Facebook makes between the two main types of information immediately visible on the homepage (1167). Facebook presents posts using two basic methods: “Top News” or “Most Recent” (see Figure A). According to Facebook’s help page “ ‘Top News’ aggregates the *most interesting* content that your friends are posting” (Facebook qtd. in Bucher 1167). “Most Recent,” displayed as a “Ticker” format at the top right of the page, shows “all the actions your friends are making in real-time” (Facebook qtd. in Bucher 1167). As we can see in Figure A below, the user can select whether they would like to view the News Feed as “Top News” or “Most Recent.” “Top News” is the default setting, however, so the user must seek out this distinction. As depicted in Figure J, the News Feed will also “eventually return to the Top Stories view,” though Facebook does not make clear when and how this happens (“Manage Your News Feed” n.p.). This means that Facebook prioritizes relevant posts—posts more likely to capture and hold the users’ attention— over real-time developments.



- **Top Stories** shows posts from friends, Pages and groups you interact with the most, as well as other popular stories, at the top of your News Feed
- **Most Recent** shows those same stories, but in the order they were posted

Note: Your News Feed will eventually return to the **Top Stories** view.

Figure J: Options for News Feed Display (listed under Facebook “Help”)

According to Bucher's 2012 article, Facebook uses an algorithm called EdgeRank to establish relevancy and visibility of information on the site. This algorithm, which she dubs the "underlying operational logic" of Facebook, "deploys an automated and predetermined selection mechanism to establish relevancy (here conceptualized as most interesting), ultimately demarcating the field of visibility for that media space" (Bucher 1165, 1167). Using a process similar to that of search engines, EdgeRank uses three main criteria to determine a post's visibility: "affinity," "weight," and "time decay" (1167). "Time decay" dictates that old posts are not as important as newer ones, while "weight" establishes the popularity of a particular kind of post or interaction (so that a comment carries more "weight" than a like) (1167). Perhaps the most intriguing of the three is "affinity," which measures "the amount and nature of the interaction between two users" (1167). EdgeRank analyzes the level of intimacy between two users by tracking how often they send private messages, chats, or view each others' profiles (van Dijck 49, Bucher 1167-1168). Posts by friends with high "affinity scores" appear more often than those by friends who seldom interact directly may only "like" one another's posts. For Bucher, this means "Some friends thus 'count more' than others" (1168). Yet most Facebook users do not know about these methods for ranking and categorizing friendships and information. Indeed, van Dijck notes that these mechanisms are not readily apparent to the typical user, at least partially because "Facebook has been reluctant to share information about its proprietary algorithms" (van Dijck 50). In this case, Facebook is like any other interface: it imposes a hierarchy that shapes the user's experience and the accessibility of information, but is designed to appear neutral (Manovich 64, 71).

These types of technological manipulations give scholars like Jose van Dijck pause about the quality and authenticity of networked sociality. It is worth questioning whether a complex human phenomenon like friendship can ever be quantified by algorithms or binary code. It may still be possible, however, to view Facebook's implementation of EdgeRank as yet another instance in which Facebook blends human social practice with machine processes. By scoring users' "affinity" based on the kinds of interactions they have, Facebook uses familiar actions associated with friendship to make online sociality feel like a natural and recognizable extension of face-to-face contact. Again, users with high affinity scores are likely people who share friendships both off and online. Thus it may be that Facebook does not artificially engineer social connections, but tracks pre-existing connections to predict (often quite accurately) what people and issues matter to a particular user.

Facebook's ultimate goal is to populate the News Feed with posts that will capture the user's attention, so that she remains interested and involved in the social network (and, not coincidentally, views more advertisements and submits more data to be shared with third parties). Therefore, tracking the accumulation and general movement of attention is an important part of understanding how users engage with information on the social network. The way the News Feed arranges information makes for an interesting discursive environment that combines social imperatives with technologically-driven profit motives. The trackable and measurable aspects of posts on the SNS merge with socially-driven thinking practices to produce a unique form of utterance that acts twofold: to mimic and solicit social interaction, and to make those interactions quantifiable and salable. Utterances on the SNS are hypertextual appeals for attention, using knowledge

of social context to compete within a vast and ever-changing field of information. As with any form of remediation, utterances on the SNS adapt pre-existing practices with new technological means.

The layout of FB's News Feed, which doubles as the home page and is the first thing the user sees when viewing the site, is a layered multimedia interface that displays several types of shared information. The information is arranged into columns of varying size. The centermost and largest is the News Feed itself, which automatically updates with new posts from friends. As mentioned above, the default News Feed setting displays "Top Stories" first, meaning that posts generating lots of traffic or attention may remain toward the top of the feed for longer than items posted more recently that attract less attention in the way of likes or comments. The left side of the page contains a narrow column of account information like groups and a link to the user's own profile. At the right appear two other columns: the "Ticker," which shows real-time actions taken by friends on the site, and the "Trending" column, which shows current events or other popular items "trending" among Facebook users in general. And at the very top of the page, Facebook asks the user "What's on your mind?", prompting them to fill that blank space with a status, photo, or link of their own (see Figure K below):



Figure K: Facebook's status update bar

Facebook's main interface is designed to capture and retain attention, but it also relies on a sense of movement to keep the reader interested. The News Feed is the most visually and spatially attractive part of the page; on mobile versions of the site it is the

only thing displayed. The News Feed invites scrolling: the center of the page appears simply as a series of posts that continually unfurls as the reader scrolls down the page. Once the reader passes the boundary of the first page, the other columns fall away, so that the only visible items are the News Feed and some small advertisements to the right. This demonstrates Facebook's prioritization of the "most interesting" content. While the very top of the page provides real-time and "trending" content ("trending" being an adaptation of a similar function on Twitter), the user soon scrolls past all that and enters the information flow of the News Feed. The interface encourages the user to experience that flow, to relinquish themselves to the perpetual scrolling, to see what lies just beyond the boundary of the screen. The goal of the News Feed is thus twofold: it asks users to share their own information and engage with others' by liking and commenting, but it also gets them to *keep on scrolling*, to lose themselves in the seemingly-endless sea of information.

"Momentum" seems an apt analogy for the way Facebook presents information and how posts amass measurable forms of attention. It is that sense of forward movement, of knowing there is more ahead, that keeps users scrolling on the News Feed. "Momentum" also accurately describes how some posts stay popular longer than others. Another interesting detail about the News Feed mechanism is that it combines the very newest posts with those that have attracted plenty of likes or comments. When a user posts something new, it appears at the very top of the News Feed. If it does not receive immediate feedback, meaning that it does not prove "interesting" in Facebook's conception, it falls further and further down the News Feed and may not appear at all. A post that does receive immediate comments or likes stays toward the top of the feed, however. As Taina Bucher points out, there is circularity to this logic: the more people

pay attention to something, the more visible it becomes and the more attention it is likely to receive (1169). Posts either gain momentum that opens opportunities for discursive intervention from friends, or they lose momentum and fade into obscurity.

This suggests that the post— or, as I would like to call it, the utterance— is intriguingly time-sensitive. It requires some immediacy of response demanded by the spoken utterance, yet it can remain indelible in the way spoken utterance usually does not. It is a written text that has the potential to be read by hundreds of people, yet it appears in a dynamic interface that once highlights and threatens that visibility. It is indeed a remediation of the spoken utterance: it must meet the same kinds of social standards and conventions as the spoken word, but those standards are measured by algorithms rather than the spontaneity and instinct of face-to-face interaction. The utterance on Facebook must be relevant, it must demonstrate knowledge of social context, it must provoke some kind of response. Yet it extends far beyond the capacity of the spoken utterance in its ability to reach a diverse and wide-ranging audience. Readers and respondents might include family members or colleagues, intimate friends or casual acquaintances. In this sense, Facebook could be seen to flatten social context or invite the kind of general posts that would appeal to a “mass” audience. But it might also afford unexpected rhetorical situations that arise when different discourse communities come together via mutual social ties.

Thus the utterance on Facebook must walk a delicate line between wide appeal and targeted purpose. I will further explore the paradoxical nature of the Facebook utterance by examining one instance of sharing on the site, as it occurs within the context of the News Feed.^{viii} Although no single utterance can characterize the way sharing

functions on FB, the case studies can be thought of as “snapshots” that capture at least some aspects common to the phenomenon of sharing. For the first case study I have selected a post that seems to have captured the all-important “momentum” necessary to maintain longevity and generate multiple responses. The post, at seventeen hours old at the time of this writing, remains near the top of the News Feed and is one of the oldest posts to have held this position.^{ix} Thus far it has generated 20 likes and 16 comments. The “utterance” is an original status update, rather than a photo or shared article, and at 156 words it is rather long for a Facebook post. The post itself, in Figure L below, is a humorous list of observations on the idiosyncrasies of the Oregon Driver Manual:

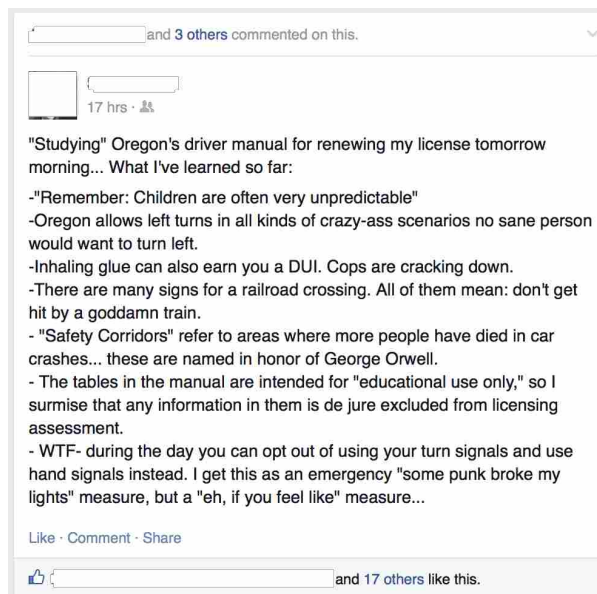


Figure L: Status Update

The tone and content of the post employ an approach common in the genre of the status update: it contains light observational humor arising from everyday life. It has a sort of “mass appeal,” though it may be of particular interest to those audience members who drive in Oregon or who drive in general. The post also blends textual references with

commentary on that text. As with most forms of sharing, this post combines a relevant and recognizable text with unique commentary— and in this case, the amount of commentary actually overwhelms the content taken from the text itself.

The post generates a lively conversation, which helps it capture and maintain the momentum necessary to stay toward the top of the News Feed. This may be partially because it casts a wide net and thus garners a wide range of comments from its varied audience. See the comments in Figure M:

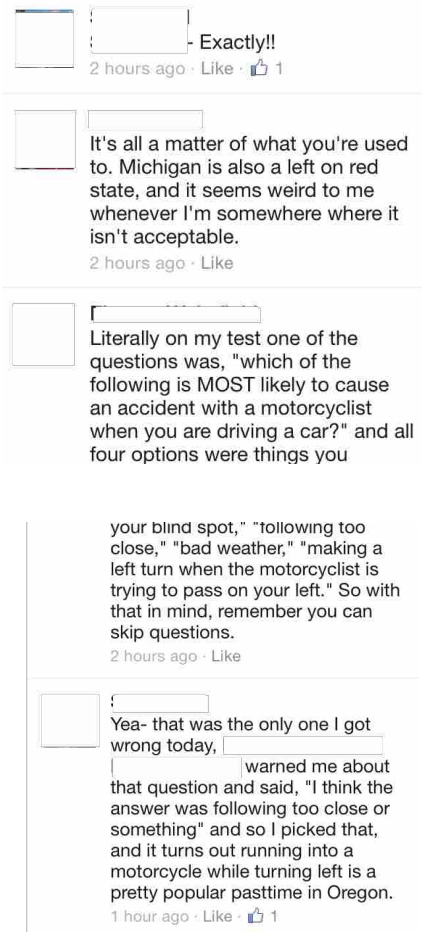


Figure M: Comments Section

The comments mirror the original post in content and tone. Similarly to the spoken utterance, the utterance on Facebook will usually abide by social convention by matching

the timbre of the conversation. Most of the comments above are just as light, humorous, and casual as the status update itself. Some merely express their appreciation for the humor of the post, especially early on in the comment thread. As the conversation evolves, however, people begin to raise significant questions or qualms about driving practices in Oregon and elsewhere. One person asks to hear more about rules for left turns, which sparks an informative discussion of the legality of particular kinds of left turns and how they differ across states. Another commenter, who has driven in Oregon and Michigan, notes in response to others' exasperation about left turn laws that "It's all a matter of what you're used to." Still others chime in to remark on the bizarre nature of the Oregon drivers test. Overall, the people participating in the discussion seize upon the most interesting aspects of the status update and extrapolate from there. In this way, the original utterance serves as a catalyst for discursive action.

The original post generates a spontaneous and engaging discussion about shared experiences, in spite of (or because of) the fact that not all members of the conversation know each other or belong to the same social circle. This post is a good example of how a single utterance on Facebook can strike the balance between global and local address. This status update addresses hundreds of friends and acquaintances, but the conversation takes a specific form driven by the people who respond.^x It is one instance of how Facebook remediates speech, by extending and transmuting the capacities of the spoken utterance. It allows one utterance to cast a wide net to capture the attention of several audiences, yet it can still result in a casual, spontaneous and socially rewarding discussion.

It is difficult to say, however, whether the status update generates this much discussion only because the EdgeRank algorithm scored it highly enough that it remained visible on the News Feed. Doubtless there are other posts that may have generated the same number of comments, but did not receive comments or likes early enough to grant it the necessary staying-power. It proves next to impossible to determine whether the content of the post or its high Edgerank score is what helps it retain momentum and capture users' attention and participation. Most likely it is some combination of both. On Facebook it is not possible to extricate users' attention from the platform's technological means of tracking it. Once again we see the paradoxical, somewhat circular, and wholly intertwined relationship between human user and machine process on Facebook. Thus the remediation of speech on Facebook presents particular challenges: the utterance must strike a balance between immediacy of appeal and longevity for sustained conversation if it is to remain visible for long.

The utterance examined above appeals to several Facebook audiences at once. It is also worth discussing a post that is more specific and targeted in nature. Figure N below shows a status update, posted on September 24, 2014. Because it was posted months prior to this writing, this example will not reveal as much as the previous one about the relationship between "successful" posts and the News Feed. It does, however, prompt a more rigorous and specific discussion aimed at a particular audience, and it garners real assent as well as the amicable assent we saw in the post above:

Just got called a misogynist, arrogant, boundary violating handmaiden (to the mens) by a radfem for defending trans womanhood. All in a post that claimed TERF is a term used by online terrorists to shout down uppity women. How predictable.

Like · Comment · Share

👍 3 people like this.

↪ 2 shares

Figure N: Status Update 2

It is immediately apparent that the purposes, contexts, and tone of this post differ significantly from those of the previous example. While both use the status update function to share some level of frustration arising from daily experience, this post launches a stringent critique of a particular branch of radical feminism. The post also assumes readers' basic knowledge of terms like "radfem," "handmaiden," and "TERF."^{xi} Already the post demarcates a focused audience within the larger circle of Facebook friends. Although the user addresses the post to all friends (a small icon next to the user's name indicates who can see the post from among the user's friends), the post's terminology narrows its scope. This does not preclude participation from people who may not fully understand all of the post's terms, however. See Figures O1 and O2 on the following page:

Just got called a misogynist, arrogant, boundary violating handmaiden (to the mens) by a radfem for defending trans womanhood. All in a post that claimed TERF is a term used by online terrorists to shout down uppity women. How predictable.

Like · Comment · Share

3 people like this.

2 shares

- i dont really undrestand what you said, but fuck that person
September 24, 2014 at 9:30am · Like · 2
- radfems have been pretty vocal about how they do not consider trans women women and therefore cannot incorporate them I into their brand of feminism. TERF means Trans Exclusionary Rad Fem.
September 24, 2014 at 9:39am · Like · 1
- So irritating. And yeah, predictable 😞
September 24, 2014 at 10:18am · Like
- of haters gonna hate. yeah fuck that person.
September 24, 2014 at 10:39am · Like
- I would like to see TERFs befriend a trans woman and say that shit to her face, see how it feels.
September 24, 2014 at 10:41am · Like
- Hahaha yeah I saw that "terrorist term" argument broken down once somewhere online, maybe it was by a friend or someone I follow here. Thusly: "Well, what kind of feminist would you say you are?" "Radical." "And do you believe in including transwomen in your spaces or definition of womanhood?" "No." "So you would say you believe in excluding them." "Yes." "...". Anyhow that sucks. Boo. Did she really say "handmaiden?" Who says that?
September 24, 2014 at 10:49am · Like
- Maybe you should change your name to Ofevan though... 😞
September 24, 2014 at 10:50am · Like · 1

- Ignore it
September 24, 2014 at 10:58am · Like
- what do you think of this?:
<http://afeministroars.wordpress.com/.../you-may-call-me.../>

You may call me a TERF but I am not transphobic
Disclaimer: I accept that, like every other group on the...
AFEMINISTROARS.WORDPRESS.COM

September 24, 2014 at 11:14am · Like · 1
- Feminism doesn't need to be a war
September 24, 2014 at 11:22am · Like · 2
- ve had some encounters with TERFs online and they are some seriously hateful people. There are some here in the local "lgbt" community as well. I actually think some of it is self-hate and internalized transphobia. The rest is just plain ignorance.
September 24, 2014 at 11:42am · Like
- Lol radfemphobia
September 24, 2014 at 12:02pm · Like
- so when exactly in the transition process does a woman endure enough oppression to adhere to the radfem standard of approval
September 24, 2014 at 12:05pm · Like
- just want to say that I love you both and I think that arguing online is the perfect recipe for a disastrous debate about a sensitive topic.
September 24, 2014 at 2:42pm · Like · 1
- Well, that doesn't sound very loving, does it?
September 24, 2014 at 4:04pm · Like
- can imagine that anyone whose sense of self rests on the distinctness of that one's identity. - sexual, gender or racial - would find persons who blur the lines disconcerting. It's hard to feel better, worse, more or less entitled than you if I can't express how I am completely unlike you.
September 24, 2014 at 4:29pm · Like

Figure O1: Comment Section Part 1 Figure O2: Comment Section Part 2

Indeed, the first comment comes from a fellow user who professes not to understand the post's terms, but expresses solidarity anyway. Once the terminology has been cleared up, the commenters begin breaking down some of the tenets behind Trans-Exculsionary Radical Feminism, critiquing them as hateful, hypocritical, and so on. Most of the comments express various forms of affirmation (read: agreement) with the original post's anger toward feminist approaches to trans womanhood. It is not until the ninth comment that someone shares a dissenting opinion, in the form of an article linked from a feminist blog (Figure O2). The commenter asks "What do you think of this," then links to an article titled "You may call me a TERF but I am not transphobic." The commenter quietly challenges the opinions expressed by the majority of commenters, yet she does so

by referencing the words of someone else. This is a telling instance of the use of hypermedia in digital arguments: it can subtly introduce a dissenting perspective without necessarily voicing the opinion directly. In some instances this may simply water down the discussion and absolve people of accountability for their ideas. Yet in this case, it works to complicate and develop the discussion, so that the original speaker must further articulate her claims about the TERF movement (see figures O3, O4, and O5 below).

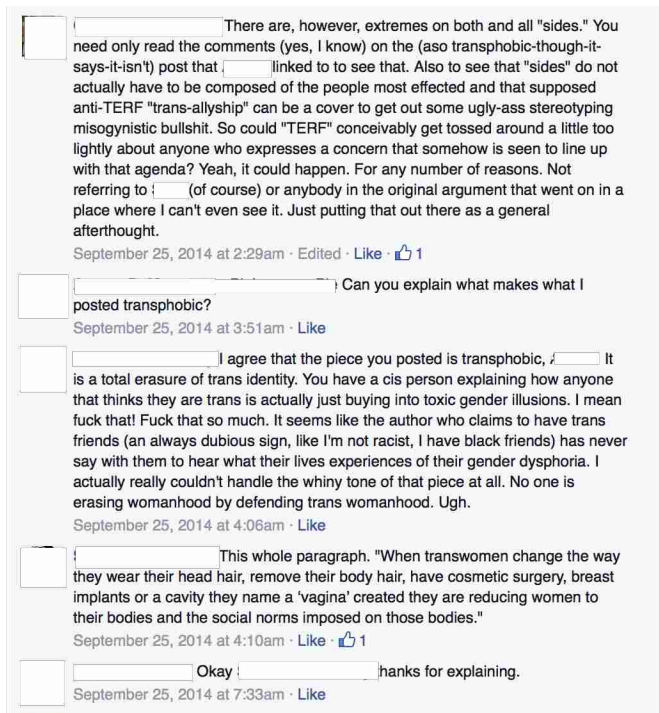


Figure O3: Comments Section 3

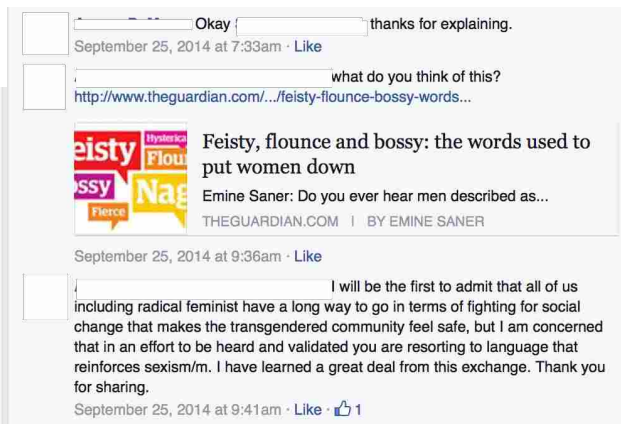


Figure O4: Comments Section 4



Figure O5: Comments Section 5

As the exchange continues, its tone changes from one of validation to one of civil, if somewhat heated, inquiry into the use of the term “TERF.” The sequence of the comments suggests that once one person shared a different perspective, others felt more comfortable to complicate, rather than simply affirm, the frustrations expressed by the original speaker. For example, one commenter notes that the term “TERF” “conceivably [gets] tossed around a little too lightly about anyone who expresses a concern that somehow is seen to line up with that agenda” (Figure O3), while another tries to explain where the trans-exclusionary perspective might come from (Figure O2). But the most productive discussion arises from the article posted from the feminist blog. One commenter claims that it is “transphobic-though-it-says-it-isn’t” (Figure O3), so the person who shared it asks “Can you explain what makes what I posted transphobic?” (Figure O3). The article, along with the commenter’s insistence on hearing people explain their claims, enriches the discussion and pushes on the assumptions of the other commenters, weaving in perspectives from other sources to make the discussion more well-rounded. In other words, the article functions as a productive counterargument.

In answering the question of what makes the blog article transphobic, the original speaker must fully articulate her conception of transphobia and deal more directly with perspectives other than her own. She engages with the article first by identifying its transphobic aspects, then by quoting from the article to demonstrate her points (Figure O3). This part of the exchange exemplifies the dynamic blend of formal argumentation and casual utterance common to the social network: while the post contains expletives and other qualities of spoken conversation, it also defends a line of reasoning by providing evidence and examples. The interlocutor’s response also melds digital and

traditionally argumentative practices: she replies to the original speaker's post by sharing another link, along with a rebuttal to her latest comments. These responses take up a slightly different issue. The interlocutor claims that "in an effort to be heard and validated [the original speaker is] resorting to language that reinforces sexism/m [sic]" such as the term "whiny" (Figure O4). She uses the linked article as part of her critique, so that reading the article is necessary in order to understand her argument fully.

Here we can see how the media-rich and socially-motivated dynamic of the SNS impacts argumentation by blending communicative practices. As with traditional argumentation, the discourse unfolds by way of references to outside texts that detail multiple perspectives. Yet on the social network, these exchanges occur in real time, increasing the spontaneity of the discourse and creating a complex interplay between rigorous argumentation and casual social interaction. The original speaker's response carries this dynamic forward, presenting an even more thorough and well-defended argument, even while employing a tone and language that might be said to be at odds with the conventions of traditional argumentation (Figure O5). Indeed, the speaker's emotions shape the content of the argument: her anger, frustration and sadness are not perceived as obstacles to equitable or rational argument. Rather those emotions, so bound up with social and personal identity, become an integral part of the argumentative environment, so that the argument cannot be separated from the lived experience that motivates it. For example, the speaker asks "HAVE ANY OF THESE WOMEN sat with trans folks and heard their stories of gender dysphoria?!?" (Figure G5). This question privileges the type of anecdotal evidence that might be suspect in a more traditional argumentative situation. More importantly, it suggests that the experience of knowing

trans people, of hearing them and attempting to understand their struggles, is the single best way to gain insight into issues of trans politics, gender dysphoria, and transphobia if one has not experienced them first hand. In other words, social awareness and sensitivity to lived experience are prerequisites to even make an argument in this setting.

This exchange also presents a commentary about online identities and the ways they interact in digital communities. The original utterance lets the speaker vent her frustrations with how her identity has been misunderstood in an online community existing apart from Facebook. Her post relates the experience of having her words misinterpreted by the radical feminist community, of being mis-categorized and ascribed to an identity with which she vehemently disagrees. Facebook is a productive place to express these frustrations because its constituency exists partly within and partly outside the radical feminist community. She uses Facebook to consider the politics of other digital communities to which she belongs, to describe and redefine her role within that other discursive realm. Some of the respondents are personal friends not overtly invested in radical feminism, while others appear conversant in feminist discourse and understand the speaker's involvement in radical feminist circles. The diversity of responses affirms the speaker's experience by showing support and solidarity, while still challenging her to articulate her beliefs and unpack her assumptions. The social network, then, is a meta-discursive, crossover space that blends users' face-to-face social relationships with identities that exist apart from embodied social connections. It is, in other words, a dynamic testing ground for identity formation, combining the experimentation and play of digital space with the ethical implications of embodied experience.

Within this dynamic we see the role of identification in argumentation on the social network. As the speaker notes in the post above, one must become “substantially one” with the other in order to make an ethical argument (Burke 20). In the exchange above, and perhaps even on FB in general, we can see users working out what it means to be “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (20-21). The speaker uses Facebook to introduce her claims to an audience both within and outside the radical feminist community, to both exercise her membership in a group and to critique it. Indeed, Facebook as a whole is a place to at once enact and discuss identity. Users can share some or all aspects of their lifestyle, while also deliberately *presenting* and critiquing it. Facebook is the ultimately rhetorical space in this sense: it allows users to articulate an identity that is attached to a name and identity associated with lived experience, yet it can also extend, revise, and redefine identity and sense of self. Arguments unfolding here are bound up in the social identity the user wants to cultivate (as they often, but not always, are in real life)— no argument can be extricated from social identity and the sensitivities that come from that. This is because sharing, rather than persuasion, is the fundamental rhetorical model on the SNS. Arguments here are profoundly social and rhetorical because they represent the self the user has constructed on the network. People use sharing to identify with one another, to reach out and to be heard, to forge social connections and to set themselves apart. Perhaps this is what people do, and what they have always done, when they share: they form tenuous but meaningful connections between the other and the self.

Notes:

ⁱ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this usage of the word “share” originated in the early 1930s in the Moral Rearmament spiritual movement, meaning “to confess one’s sins openly; to impart to others one’s spiritual experiences” (“share,” n.p.).

ⁱⁱ In this context, “information” refers to anything a FB user contributes to the SNS, be it a status update, a photo, or a comment on a friend’s post. This definition may seem too broad, since people post a wide variety of materials that hardly seem comparable. However, Lev Manovich has shown that all forms of cultural production get transformed into data when it is translated into binary code. This means that FB can flatten any user input into data for use in targeted advertising. I use “information,” rather than “data,” to acknowledge the diversity of material users contribute to SNSs, while also retaining awareness that in the digital environment, any user input may be tracked, quantified, or sold.

ⁱⁱⁱ Technological determinism refers to the idea that technology is the primary driving force behind societal development. New media scholars now largely reject technological determinism, since it neglects the role of the human agent in affecting change.

^{iv} Richard Lanham, in his book *The Economics of Attention*, claims that attention behaves somewhat like currency in the information age: individuals must assess constant appeals for their attention and make important decisions about where to devote that attention.

^v According to Julia Kristeva, any theory of the “speaking subject” must see the subject as divided between biological processes and sociological conditions (30). I use her phrase to retain sensitivity to both the embodied and symbolic elements of subject formation.

^{vi} Burkean identification rests on the establishment of shared interest. Using a set of hypothetical colleagues to illustrate the point, Burke explains: “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 20, emphasis original).

^{vii} “Web 2.0” refers to websites that privilege user-generated content and allow for greater user interactivity without necessitating knowledge of computer coding. Facebook, Twitter, and websites with commenting functions are all examples of Web 2.0 sites.

^{viii} The process of selecting a case study from a social network to which I also belong has opened important ethical and methodological questions. The author needs to bring some “inside knowledge” of social context, in order to fully explicate the milieu about which she writes. Yet the author must also maintain privacy and respect for the community she studies. For these reasons, I maintain anonymity of the subjects discussed, blanking out names when possible and using pseudonyms when necessary. I also treat any information that the user shares on a private profile as private correspondence. Unfortunately, this

means that readers may not have access to these primary materials. In order to be as illustrative as possible, I provide screenshots of all posts discussed.

^{ix} Because time-sensitivity is such an important factor when considering the visibility of posts on Facebook, I have chosen to examine a current post that exists on the News Feed in real time, at the time of writing. This allows me to track the post's movement through the feed and to study its visibility relative to newer, older, or other kinds of posts. The difficulty, though, is that the same conditions will not exist on the News Feed at a later date (though the post will presumably still appear on the user's profile).

^x The Facebook user who wrote the status update has 790 friends on the social network at the time of this writing.

^{xi} "Radfem" is short for "radical feminism;" "handmaiden" refers to women whose words or actions could be said to uphold patriarchal norms; "TERF" stands for "trans-exclusionary radical feminism" and is a topic of much contention in radical feminist circles.

CHAPTER IV
EMERGENT ARGUMENTS: NETWORKED READING
AND COMMUNAL REASONING

This dissertation has thus far argued that discursive and rhetorical practices in digital space are socially contingent and grounded in community. Knowledge in this space is culturally mediated and cooperatively constructed. Chapter One shows how audiences themselves emerge through sustained dialectical interactions with a community, while Chapter Two outlines the socially-grounded rhetorical modes that shape discourse in networked spaces. This chapter, then, will demonstrate how arguments themselves emerge out of networks of information and ideas. This chapter examines digital reading practices more directly than the previous two: one of its goals is to characterize the experience of reading and writing in digital space, in order to understand the kinds of arguments that arise on these platforms. I will refer to the act of reading through a set of hyperlinked articles, search engine results, or series of tweets as *networked reading*. This term gestures toward the non-linear, constellated structure of information online, as well as to the connections, both social and intellectual, that result from discursive action in these spaces.

The term “emergent argument” is central to this chapter and to the dissertation at large, so requires direct definition. As outlined in the introduction, an emergent argument can be defined as follows: first, it represents the overall consensus of a discourse community, consisting of multiple expressions of a shared premise or set of premises. Second, it relies on the reader’s interpretation, combined with the process of networked reading, to become visible. Third, because it is an expression of decentralized yet

collective discourse, emergent argumentation is especially effective in the rhetoric of counterpublics. Unlike other more formal argumentative modes, the goal of emergent argumentation is not to persuade a reader of a particular claim, but rather for the reader to recognize the community's mutually negotiated consensus on a given issue. This shift from claim to consensus, also outlined in the introduction, is a fundamental one for emergent argumentation.

The networked reading process is an integral part of how emergent arguments function and how readers absorb them. Similar to the shift in emergent argumentation from claim to consensus, the emphasis of networked reading shifts from tracing a linear narrative in a single source to seeking trends, patterns, and themes across multiple sources. When people read through a series of hyperlinked articles or click on a number of interrelated items in a database, the purpose of their reading is not necessarily to absorb all the details of each individual source, but rather to trace lines of commonality throughout a multiplicity of sources. In this process of exploring a network of related sources, readers uncover the complex array of ideas and voices that comprise their topic of research. These kinetic and exploratory aspects of networked reading allow the reader to combine his or her own interpretation with the premises set forth in the discourse surrounding an issue. The resulting conclusions the reader draws comprise what I am calling the emergent argument. Readers discern these arguments by reviewing large sets of related images, articles, or data and combining them with shared cultural knowledge. Due to the shift from claim to consensus, there is no single author of an emergent argument. Rather, emergent arguments combine the discourse community's approach to a topic with the reader's unique interpretation. The reader herself is part author of an

emergent argument, since her reading practices lend distinct shape to the ideas she encounters. This is especially true given the non-linear structure of digital discourse; the reader chooses their own path through the network of ideas.

In networked reading, a single article or argument functions as a piece of a larger puzzle, though it can also stand alone. There is a dual nature to networked reading: a reader can “zoom in” to examine one small node of the network—a single article or tweet, for example—or the reader can “zoom out” to see how the network of ideas fits together as a whole. The reader must take this larger view in order to access the emergent argument, which does not become apparent after reading just one article or viewing a single tweet. Instead, it arises from the contours of the discourse surrounding a given topic. They are only evident once the reader has taken the time to examine an issue from all angles. This means that the most casual reader, who may not take the time to explore all aspects of the discourse surrounding an issue, likely will not pick up on the emergent argument. As I have suggested in Chapter One, the reader must understand the shared assumptions and interests of a discourse community before engaging in meaningful audience membership.

The use of the word “argument” here may be considered contentious. “Argument” carries associations with formal argumentation in the fields of science or philosophy, but I do not necessarily employ the term in that sense. My usage gestures toward informal and interpretational arguments that arise from casual and conversational interactions. Emergent argumentation is still a process of putting forth premises in order to reach a claim.¹ Yet those premises may come from multiple interlocutors, and the overall “claim” may not be stated unilaterally, but instead it may emerge from the general consensus of a

community, as expressed through the acceptance and perpetuation of a particular premise.

One might say that this does not comprise an argument at all, but simply a set of interrelated premises. However, I deliberately retain the word “argument” because I would claim that emergent argumentation represents a new method for argument, one that does some of the same work as its more formal counterparts, if in a different form and with the potential for different results. The best way to demonstrate this is from the perspective of the reader, who is the audience to the emergent argument. As mentioned above, emergent argumentation is a mode of expression that comes along with networked reading practices. As with formal argumentation, readers of emergent arguments process appeals or premises any time they search for a topic on Google or click on a Twitter hashtag. The end result of this reading, however, is not that the reader has been persuaded of a single claim as it may be in formal argumentation. Instead, the reader has been exposed to enough similar or shared premises that she can now extrapolate to reach a conclusion based on those premises. In other words, the reader, by applying her own interpretive skills, can recognize a community’s consensus.

I propose emergent argumentation as a theoretical lens that can help us understand the particular rhetorical strategies and interpretive practices that shape digital discourse. This chapter demonstrates how a rhetorical model that can often be fragmented and erratic can produce argumentation that is simultaneously decentralized and coherent, representing a multiplicity of viewpoints while still imparting a distinct response to an issue. To do so, it will be necessary to discuss how people use networked reading practices to navigate information-dense spaces by way of hyperlinks. In its consideration

of networked reading, the chapter also assesses the shift from immersing oneself in a single source to moving rapidly between multiple sources. This will entail confronting the significant cognitive and interpretive challenges that come with such a shift. Finally, to fully illuminate the concept of emergent arguments, I will conduct two case studies. First, I will examine a set of hyperlinked articles surrounding a particularly contentious episode of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. This will show how networked reading can reveal trends and themes in a given discourse community, disclosing an overarching argument that transcends any one author's take on the controversy. Second, I will analyze the Twitter hashtag #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter, to show how Twitter users' numerous and varied interpretations of a concept can result in a powerful argument, arising not from a single author but from the combined voices of a community. Each of these case studies demonstrates that arguments are negotiated collectively in the digital environment.

The hyperlink is the most basic mechanism by which the internet creates connections and organizes information. The hyperlink is the node that gives the internet its networked structure; it is the internet's organizing principle, and it plays a significant role in the ways that people exchange and interpret information in digital spaces. The introduction to internet scholars' Joseph Turow and Lokman Tsui's book *The Hyperlinked Society* credits technology philosopher Ted Nelson with coining the term "hyperlinks" in the mid-1960's (3). The term refers to "retrievable associative trails" originally intended for citation purposes (2, 21). Most commonly, "hyperlink" refers to the embedded links in articles that lead to other pertinent sources. Hyperlinks also appear as results on search engines, images or graphics that link to other sites, advertisements,

and so on (3). Hyperlinks mediate almost every interaction we have with information online, and they appear in a variety of manifestations across the web.

At its core, a hyperlink is a *selection*, a deliberate choice to link to one article or source over another. Similar to the interfaces of the computer desktop or website menu, the hyperlink can appear as a neutral medium to look “through” but not “at.” The hyperlink may seem like a mere portal to information, but like any interface it “acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media” (Manovich 64). Hyperlinks embed layers of meaning into a text, but to the typical internet user these connections may appear self-evident. Against this apparent neutrality, Joseph Turow makes the integral point that hyperlinks result from cultural value systems: “the hyperlink organizes our attention by suggesting which ideas are worth being heard and which are not... They are created and situated in a political-social context” (21). As with any other form of mass media, these contexts are intertwined with profitability: the more visible a hyperlink becomes, the more money it will earn. Many hyperlinked networks are designed to generate profit by getting readers to follow certain information pathways. Thus the hyperlink does not simply provide access to information, but often shapes the user’s experience of it. The hyperlink, especially on search engines like Google, can naturalize hierarchies of information and preclude readers from realizing alternative ways to structure knowledge.

Although the internet appears to place all of its information “at our fingertips,” realistically the user can only access a very limited selection through basic interfaces like search engines. That choice might be made by a complex algorithm, in the case of Google or other search engines, or it might be made by an individual author in the case of

hyperlinked articles. For example, Google uses the PageRank algorithm, which ranks search results by aggregating target terms and numbers of links to a given page to determine its “importance” or popularity (Finkelstein 105, “PageRank” n.p.). “Importance” is determined based partially on a site’s relevance, and partially on the authority it accrues by having been cited by other trustworthy sites (n.p.). PageRank also takes into account a link’s popularity based on numbers of views. Such quantitative criteria usually supply relatively accurate and useful results, but they also rely on a limited interpretation of a search term and tend toward sources that are already popular. Thus the search engine filters the vast majority of items available, presenting a minute selection that accords with prevailing trends.

Twitter’s Trending function uses a similar algorithm that could also be said to limit the visibility of particular topics while amplifying others. Media scholar Tarleton Gillespie has argued that the Trending algorithm, while designed to publicize popular topics by taking into account whether a term is “accelerating in its use” or if it is “being used across several networks of people” rather than a single yet vocal group, can end up missing important cultural movements such as Occupy Wall Street, which surprisingly never trended on Twitter even at the height of its popularity. (“Can an algorithm be wrong?” n.p.). It is not clear whether Twitter purposefully left #OccupyWallStreet off of its list of trending topics, or whether the hashtag simply never met the algorithm’s complex requirements to be considered a trend. What is clear, however, is that algorithms play a significant yet invisible role in structuring the information networks in which we now spend so much of our time.

To put it simply: hyperlinks, and the algorithms that display them, make arguments. By selecting one piece of media content from infinite amounts of information to display in search results or connect to original text, hyperlinks make claims about what information is relevant or how a reader should interpret a search term. It remains unclear whether those arguments challenge popular beliefs and value systems, however.

According to Turow and Tsui, some internet scholars “claim that both mainstream and nonestablishment sectors of the digital media target people who already agree with them, by producing content that reinforces, rather than challenges, their shared points of view”

(4). Media scholar Tarleton Gillespie also examines this phenomenon, citing Eli Pariser’s argument that personalized algorithms designed to display information or resources aligned with a user’s preferences can create “filter bubbles,” which display “only the news we expect and the political perspectives we already hold dear” (Gillespie 188).

Indeed, algorithms that tailor the user’s experience of the internet to preexisting preferences create the possibility that a reader may never even encounter a perspective that challenges their own.

This concern impacts any community reasoning about shared beliefs in any rhetorical setting. Termed “enclave rhetorics” by Patricia Roberts-Miller,ⁱⁱ discourse communities that engage only with those who share their beliefs may never push their own ideological boundaries or encounter dissenting opinions (Roberts-Miller 41).

Enclaves are bound to form on the internet, since users can simply choose outlets that align with their beliefs. This may be even more true of the internet than it has been of other mass media formats, like television. For one, algorithms like PageRank or Twitter’s Trending mechanism already begin to establish enclaves of the reader’s preferences, with

or without the reader's knowledge. Even when the reader actively seeks their own information sources or communities of shared interest, it becomes all too easy to fall back on sources that confirm their values rather than challenging them.

This aspect of the internet has both positive and negative implications. While “enclave rhetorics” can make space for progressive or radical ideas that may be rejected in a wider public forum, they also allow value systems to remain static and unchallenged by alternative world views. Roberts-Miller addresses this issue in her treatment of Jane Mansbridge's work, “Using Power/Fighting Power.” For Mansbridge, “A political system needs to have places where people can engage in discussions that might be prohibited by the larger public sphere...[but] people must engage in critical discourse outside of enclaves as well” (Roberts-Miller 41). As we will see in the Twitter case study below, and as Chapter 1 has demonstrated, the potential for counterpublics to carve out space for their discourse is one of the most powerful aspects of the internet. The structure of the web may subtly discourage people from seeking out these alternative spaces that challenge their thinking, however. It seems that the more hyperlinks are used for marketing purposes, the less potential they have to push on users' ideological boundaries. Turow and Tsui show that “media users themselves show little inclination toward diverse ideas. On the contrary, they tend to use the Web to confirm their own world-views” (4). Thus the hyperlinks that generate the most profits will be ones that affirm, rather than complicate, readers' belief systems. In other words, it may not be profitable to encourage readers to “engage in critical discourse outside of enclaves.” This has probably always been the case with mass media, but it seems especially pressing here since institutions

like Google masquerade as neutral purveyors of knowledge, when they really supply sets of information carefully constructed to confirm existing beliefs.

As long as profit reigns on the internet, it is unlikely that we will be able to solve the problem of enclave rhetorics entirely. The question of whether the internet encourages readers to encounter and engage dissent looms large in this discussion, and it cannot be easily answered or dismissed. While this chapter does not directly address the role of hyperlinks in search engines, it will closely examine the ways that hyperlinked articles convey assumptions about the issues at hand. Additionally, the chapter discusses instances where hyperlinks *do* push against readers' beliefs or lead them toward dissenting views. Most importantly, the chapter suggests that the hyperlink as connective node allows readers to construct their *own* networks of ideas and arguments. After all, not every reader is satisfied with clicking the first Google result or taking an author's hyperlinked resources at face value. Discerning, active readers can draw their own connections and explore beyond the boundaries of their own beliefs. Indeed, reading in the era of hyperlinks and algorithms remains much the same as reading in the age of books and library stacks in this regard: it has always been up to the reader to challenge their own assumptions and grapple with positions that differ from their own.

In any case, it is clear that readers have developed literacy practices that respond and adapt to the digital reading environment. In order to synthesize the vast amounts of data available in the digital age, readers must be able to switch rapidly between interpretive modes. Katherine Hayles argues in her 2012 book *How We Think* that traditional close reading is only one of multiple reading practices, and that new reading modes represent a “strategic response to an information-intensive environment” (12).

Hayles outlines three major kinds of reading: close, hyper, and machine. Close reading is arguably the most culturally familiar form of reading: it is individual, linear, and focused primarily on a single text. At the other end of the spectrum, machine reading takes place when a computer interprets algorithms or code, often in order to organize data into patterns recognizable for the human user. Hyper reading bridges the gap between machine coding and human interpretation. It “overlaps with machine reading in *identifying patterns*” (73, emphasis added). Hyper reading is the act of skimming, scanning, searching for data within a large body of information that has often been assembled by a computer. This type of reading blends the computer’s algorithmic processes of ordering and categorizing data with the human’s methods for analysis and interpretation. The most obvious example of hyper reading is the Google search: the PageRank algorithm determine which items appear for a given search term, while the human reader scans and sorts the items further to determine which ones are useful.

As Hayles notes, hyper or networked reading is a deliberate response to the particular way that the internet structures information. Much of the information on the internet appears in databases, which call their own kinds of reading practices in comparison to the close reading of a single narrative or essay. Lev Manovich cites the database as a key component of cultural production in the new media environment (227). Defining it simply as “a structured collection of data,” Manovich views the database as a “cultural form” that has been around since the time of the ancient Greeks, in the form of encyclopedias, bibliographies, and so on (218). Like all aspects of new media, the database is the latest iteration of a long-standing mode of knowledge production. Yet the prevalence of the internet means that people are spending considerably amounts of time

accessing information arranged by databases, arguably more so than they did before the advent of the internet. The internet itself can be considered a hypertext database, and nearly all of the internet's information is stored in a database of some kind.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even more importantly, the database has influenced the ways that people conceive of internet retrieval and analysis in a digital setting. Popular websites like Wikipedia and the Internet Movie Database present entries interconnected through hyperlinks, so that it is possible to jump from one related topic to the next in a nearly endless chain of information. Online encyclopedias like these hearken to their print-based predecessors, but the experience of reading a series on Wikipedia is markedly different from flipping through the volumes of an encyclopedia or dictionary. This is because the hyperlinked structure of a Wikipedia page encourages the reader to jump from one entry to the next, embedding links in the text of the entry itself and providing lists of related articles. This impulse to move quickly between related pieces of information characterizes the experience of networked reading.

The database represents one way of viewing the world, and it requires its own approaches to reading and interpretation. This can be said of any form of cultural production, including narrative. These two modes for presenting information could be said to be antithetical to one another. Narrative, designed for close reading, provides a framework for understanding its contents in relationship to one another through cause and effect. The narrative usually implies a beginning, middle, and end. Meanwhile the database, designed for networked or machine reading, "represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list" (Manovich 225). While the database itself may not require any method of categorization, the human user needs some sort of framing to make

sense of the data. Manovich calls this framing the “interface.” The interface mediates the user’s experience of raw data by employing algorithms to sort it into a recognizable set of categories. Thus, every aspect of database creation involves choice: the choice of what to include, what to leave out, what categorization to employ, if any. The interface, in short, is pure rhetoric. It presents a chosen set of data and places it in a strategic order, providing a lens through which the reader can view the data as a whole.

Although databases do rely on interpretive and ideological decisions to render their data coherent for the human user, it is important to recognize the key differences between databases and other information structures such as the narrative. Even when the database does draw connections between pieces of information, it relies on networked structures to do so and does not explicate the relationships between data. Manovich maintains that the internet is essentially anti-narrative: databases are open-ended, with new pieces being added all the time, so that the end result of a database “is a collection, not a story” (221). While a narrative invites close reading in a sequential order, the database encourages jumping, meandering, exploring. This marks a fundamental shift in the way that readers interact with information, depending on medium and organizational framework.

If the end result of a database is “a collection, not a story,” then the end result of hyper reading is a network of interrelated items, not a linear chain of events or ideas (Manovich 221). In the digital environment, readers seek connections between pieces of data, drawing from any number of locations and contexts to create a network of ideas. A database might contain a seemingly arbitrary set of numbers without identifying the pattern that holds the numbers together. Similarly, machine reading detects patterns,

some of which may be too huge or too subtle for the human to recognize without the aid of statistical analysis (Hayles 73). It rests with the human user to supply that analysis, surveying patterns to identify connections and discover meaning. Hayles reminds us, in response to Lev Manovich's claim that narrative and database are "natural enemies," that "if narrative often dissolves into database...database catalyzes and indeed demands narrative's reappearance as soon as meaning and interpretation are required" (Manovich 228, Hayles 176). Forging connections between pieces of information in a database is an interpretive act, even if those connections emerge from several contexts rather than a single one. Hyper reading comprises a dynamic blend of interpretive practices, working in tandem with both close and machine reading to make sense of the media-rich environment.

Following with Hayles, I view networked reading as one among a set of reading skills we can employ, just as we can employ close reading or other discursive practices when appropriate. However, media scholars and neurologists have noted that networked reading makes it more difficult to switch between interpretive modes, and indeed that it can effectively colonize the brain by rewiring the human brain. Nicholas Carr, in his 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, cites neurological research to show that the human brain exhibits "neuroplasticity," allowing it to create new neural pathways that adapt to repeated actions and specific needs of an environment (31). According to psychiatrist Norman Doidge, for example, the brain responds to new experiences or technologies by generating new neural structures (30). This means that the human brain is highly dynamic and responsive, capable of forming new habits of mind and ways of thinking. Paradoxically, however, Doidge finds that neuroplasticity can also

“[impose] its own form of determinism on our behavior” (34). According to Doidge, when we form new neural circuitry “we long to keep it activated,” often at the expense of lesser-used pathways (Doidge qtd. in Carr 34). The brain “wants” to keep using the new pathway, turning new ways of thinking into entrenched habits. Ultimately, this suggests that the brain is “plastic,” but not “elastic” (34). We can generate new modes of thinking, in other words, but we cannot easily return to previous ones.

Carr uses this research to argue that networked reading rewrites our brains. His book examines the sorts of mental habits we take on when we spend so much of our time skipping between short, hyperlinked articles rather than reading longer texts. He finds digital space to be “an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning,” and in this setting our brains take on those same characteristics (116). This is especially true given the internet’s methods for providing what Carr calls “positive reinforcements” (116). Our brains crave the quick but satisfying rewards of a receiving a new email, viewing a recent photo, or clicking the next link. In other words, “the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli—repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive—that have been shown to result in strong alterations in brain circuits and functions” (116). The compulsive and reward-driven qualities of the internet, combined with the brain’s neuroplasticity, comprise convincing evidence that the digital environment can make significant and indelible changes on brain structure. For Carr, this means that the more we read, write, and think via the internet, the less capable we become of linear, close reading.

I do not dispute evidence that increased internet use changes the brain’s modes of thinking on a neurological level. While Carr’s text may be too quick to dismiss the kinds

of thinking encouraged by networked reading as “hurried,” “distracted,” and “superficial,” the points he raises about the neurological impacts of the internet are important ones. Even with these qualifications, I would argue along with Hayles that networked reading need not preclude close reading. If one cares to retain close reading skills, they can do so by making a pointed effort to practice. Perhaps close reading is comparable to learning languages in that it requires continual usage and maintenance in order to retain the skill. Carr provides only anecdotal evidence to show that hyper reading degrades the ability to close reading when a person actually attempts to retain close reading practices (5-10). Many of his examples suggest that people no longer show an interest in reading in a close and linear fashion, not that it is no longer possible for them to do so.^{iv} It may be true that hyper reading skills predominate over close reading if given free reign. It is certainly true that not all readers will make the concerted effort to read linear, lengthy texts. Yet perhaps this is due not to some deleterious regression of the human brain, but to the complex adaptation of discursive practices to the exigencies of an information economy.

To take this claim a step further, one might even argue that neurological changes such as the ones Carr describes via Doerge are not as ruinous as they may first appear. Indeed, some of Carr’s argument rests upon dichotomies between linearity and fragmentation, focus and distraction, individual and community. Carr’s book contends that “calm, focused, and undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, overlapping bursts” (10). A consistent problem with this claim in Carr’s text, however, is that it establishes “the linear mind” as normative or default, without considering other

modes of thinking that this term pushes aside. Carr's text returns constantly to the binary between linearity and fragmentation, where linearity is the superior term. Yet the relationship between these central terms goes largely unexamined, and it is not clear how Carr reaches the conclusion that linearity is a superior mode of thought. I would contend instead that modes of thinking or writing do not need to be linear, individual, or "focused" on a single context to be rational, reasonable, or intellectually valuable. Again, Carr argues convincingly about the neurological repercussions of networked reading, it is also important to examine some of the assumptions that inform his claims.

Nicholas Carr is not the first to have levied charges against the new technologies for producing shallow arguments and distracted readers. These critiques tap into long-entrenched anxieties about the relationship between thought and technology, dating as far back as Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato argues via Socrates that the discovery of writing "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories" but instead rely on the written word to recall information (323). One might argue that in this respect, the internet renders our brains even more dependent on an external technology; now if we cannot remember something, we can simply Google it. Yet Plato levies a further charge against writing, claiming that "writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence" (324). For Plato, writing texts lack the presence and life of oral delivery: unlike a person, a text cannot answer a question or expand on an assertion. In short, written texts cannot generate dialectic.

This perspective on writing certainly anticipates the anxieties that crop up with the advent of any new technology, but it also illuminates the potential for new media

texts to enact the dialectical qualities of the spoken word. The immediacy of digital communication enables direct conversation between authors and audiences. Its dynamic multimodality makes for a participatory and lively experience that moves us closer to a secondary orality, or even a “tertiary orality” as I have argued in the introductory chapter. Importantly, it is not simply the formal structure of the digital communication that mimics orality, but also the communal foundation of digital rhetorics. Emergent argumentation, as a digital rhetoric, is premised upon socially engaged discourse and the idea of audience as community. Like orality, emergent argumentation works through communal reasoning—the rhetor does not argue “at” or “for” a given constituency, but instead argues “with” the community by inviting, responding to, and building from audience input. In these ways, emergent argumentation is profoundly dialectical, and thus brings us closer to the vibrant and vital discursive exchange that Plato so cherishes.

Carr, meanwhile, is invested in the printed word for precisely the same reasons that Plato cautions against it—it is static, fixed, and designed for a solitary reading experience. Carr prizes these aspects of print text, claiming that in comparison, the internet undermines “the ability to know, in depth, a subject for ourselves, to construct within our own minds the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence” (Carr 143). For Carr, networked reading does not allow for the immersive and focused experience of reading a single print text; nor does it allow readers to discover how ideas work in relationship to one another. Yet I would argue that reading and communication in digital space, with the move toward a tertiary orality, encourage exactly the kinds of intellectual activities that Carr associates with print text. Not only can networked reading allow direct and immediate communication between author and

audience, but it also allows the reader to forge their own path through a network of ideas, to draw connections and explore the interrelated contexts within a discourse community. Combined with the social interactivity described above, networked reading has the potential to be just as rewarding and intellectually engaging—at both the individual and the community level—as the reading experience Carr associates with print-based reading.

To illustrate how networked reading allows readers to draw connections, engage discourse communities, and discern emergent arguments, I will now conduct two case studies. The first concentrates on the process of networked reading itself, examining a series of hyperlinked articles to see how an emergent argument arises not from a single author or article, but from the medley of voices in a given discourse community. The second case study looks even more closely at the mechanics of the emergent argument, reading a Twitter hashtag to discover how consensus emerges in the form of varied and multivocal expressions of a shared concept. In both cases, sustained social engagement with the discourse community is prerequisite to productive argumentation.

The first case study examines a series of hyperlinked articles pertaining to the television series *Game of Thrones (GoT)*. Based on George R.R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *Game of Thrones* is a cultural phenomenon comprised not just of the book series and show, but of countless pieces of critical commentary, fan fiction, memes, and social media posts devoted to the books and show. *GoT* demonstrates how all pop texts in the digital environment become multimedia texts, given the contributions of fans, critics, and the series' creators across multiple digital platforms. Each episode of *GoT* spawns a host of think pieces, Tweets, reviews, and Tumblr posts. This, combined

with its often-controversial subject matter, makes the series fertile ground for digital argumentation.

Here, I will examine the discourse surrounding the sixth episode of the fifth season, titled “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.” This episode has given rise to a particularly fervent debate, as it depicts the rape of a prominent character, Sansa Stark. A brief note about the context surrounding this episode: *GoT* is infamous for its representations of violence, sexual and otherwise. The show depicts a violent culture based loosely on the Medieval era. It contains countless scenes of slaughter and multiple instances of sexual violence. The show has been criticized for its treatment of rape in particular. As the articles examined below will attest, the show has employed rape as a plot device and even as a disturbing kind of backdrop in scenes where other, more prominent action occurs simultaneously.^v Critics have levied charges about the show’s gratuitous depictions of sexual violence well before “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken” aired (on May 17, 2015). This context informs the critical and popular reception of the episode in question.

“Unbowed” continues in *GoT*’s violent vein, depicting the brutal rape of central character Sansa Stark by the sadistic Ramsay Bolton. Given the show’s history with problematic portrayals of rape, this episode spurred reactions of rage and disgust from fans and critics alike^{vi}. But beyond expressions of outrage, the episode also gave rise to a dynamic discussion about the social responsibilities and political implications of television shows. The discourse surrounding “Unbowed” demonstrates how argumentation is negotiated collectively in digital space, and it also provides an opportunity to examine the dual nature of networked reading described above. A reader

can “zoom in” to see one author’s argument, or they can “zoom out,” viewing hyperlinked trails and exploring a mélange of voices and perspectives. Each mode of reading leads to a unique insight into the discourse. The case study below will trace one possible trail of hyperlinks, analyzing the interplay between the smaller nodes of the discursive network and the arguments that emerge when we take a wider view.

We begin as any networked reading session begins: with one hyperlinked article. Readers arrive at the starting point of a series of hyperlinks any number of ways. They might start with a Google search, encounter an article while visiting their social media account, or happen upon a piece while reading their favorite website or online periodical. The article I have selected to catalyze the networked reading session is titled “*Game of Thrones* walks a fine line on rape: how much more can audiences take?” by Sarah Hughes. It was published on *The Guardian*’s website on May 20, 2015. This article outlines the controversy surrounding Sansa’s rape in “Unbowed.” It details perspectives from the two major sides of the debate, providing links to the most prominent articles addressing the topic. The first camp decries *GoT* for including a rape scene that does nothing to further the show’s narrative or to develop the characters of Sansa or Ramsay. The second camp defends the show for representing rape as a cruel inevitability of a patriarchal, war-based culture. This article provides a snapshot of the discourse, and its hyperlinks comprise a bibliography of the pertinent resources for further reading. For example, Hughes links to an article citing a statement from Senator Claire McCaskill, which announces that she will no longer watch the show due to its “gratuitous rape scene” (McCaskill n.p.). That article, published on *The Hollywood Reporter*, then links to a statement from feminist blog *The Mary Sue* that proclaims, “We Will No Longer Be

Promoting HBO's *Game of Thrones*" (Couch n.p., Pantozzi n.p.). Following this brief chain of links shows the resounding impact that Sansa's scene has had on the viewership, giving the impression that this episode was the last straw for an already-exhausted audience of critics and fans.

Hughes' article also links to articles on previous problematic *GoT* episodes, statements from the show's creators, and authors defending the show's choice to portray Sansa's rape. The article casts a wide net that diversifies the reading experience and exposes the reader to multiple sides of the controversy. For instance, in one paragraph Hughes links to two prominent pieces that represent opposing views. First, she links to Alyssa Rosenberg's article from *The Washington Post*, titled "*Game of Thrones* has always been a show about rape." After briefly summarizing and quoting from that piece, she links to Joanna Robinson's article in *Vanity Fair*, titled "*Game of Thrones* Absolutely did *Not* Need to Go There with Sansa Stark." The reader need not take Hughes' word about the argument each article makes; instead they can open them side-by-side and read for themselves. While this might draw attention away from Hughes' article, it also grants the reader a fuller view of the issue at hand.

Thus we jump to another node on the network—recalling that we could have jumped to any number of others, which would lead to a different set of insights. Alyssa Rosenberg's piece responds to the widespread anger and disappointment with *GoT* by arguing that it, along with Martin's series, is "a story about the consequences of rape and denial of sexual autonomy" (n.p.). The article contains an extensive list of instances of sexual violence in *GoT* to show that Sansa's rape is not random or gratuitous, but part of the series' larger commentary about the harmful impacts of patriarchy and war on both

women and men (n.p.). This article also employs hyperlinks, if more sparingly than the first. Here the author uses hyperlinks to corroborate her argument, citing authors whose arguments she wishes to counter as well as articles that substantiate her claims. For example, Rosenberg links to an article by Amanda Marcotte on *Slate*, which argues that Sansa's rape "was not treated lightly, but presented as an act of war against the Stark family" (n.p.). This link allows the reader to delve deeper into the relationship between sexual violence and war—even if it means straying from Rosenberg's essay to another node of the discursive network.

We now jump back to explore Joanna Robinson's *Vanity Fair* article, which Sarah Hughes presents as a major counterpoint to Rosenberg's piece. Here, Robinson argues that the rape scene merely exploits Sansa's character, "[undercutting] all the agency that's been growing in Sansa since the end of last season" without developing the plot or the characters involved (n.p.). Robinson's piece, published to the web on the same night that "Unbowed" aired, anticipates the attitudes taken by *The Mary Sue* and other critics, namely that viewers did not "need" the rape to conclude that Ramsay is an evil character or that Sansa is in a dire position (n.p.) In fact, Jill Pantozzi's article mirrors much of the *Vanity Fair* article in content and approach: both articles links to several pieces of commentary from the actors themselves, providing a unique vantage from which to view the debate.

While the similarities between these two pieces appear redundant, they also show how momentum can build around ideas in digital discourse communities. At first this may appear to mark the formation of an "enclave rhetoric," where dissenting opinions cannot be expressed. Yet the presence of articles speaking in defense of the show, such as

Rosenburg and Marcotte's, show that dissenting opinions comprise an integral part of the discursive network. Of course, it is not guaranteed that a reader will click on those pieces and challenge their own beliefs if they have already decided to reject *GoT*. As with any reading method, it is possible that readers will only seek opinions that affirm their own. But this does not mean that dissenting opinions do not exist; rather, pieces like Rosenburg's respond in complex and productive ways to the prevailing opinions by accounting for all aspects of the debate. Rosenburg's piece employs hyperlinks to embed her argument within the larger network of ideas to which she responds. Thus her piece is not isolated from the discourse, but uses hyperlinks to show how it connects to the existing conversation.

As of yet we have "zoomed in" to examine the individual pieces of the discursive network surrounding the "Unbowed" controversy. But the latent details of the debate only emerge once a reader "zooms out" to view larger discursive trends. Reading a single article on the episode shows one author's stance, but reading a series of hyperlinked articles can show how the entire discourse community is thinking and talking about an issue. Taking this wider view of the discursive network reveals what I am calling the emergent argument. For example, reading through the articles discussed above shows the shared assumptions and points of stasis for the community of people writing about "Unbowed." The respondents take it as a given that what happens in the fictional *GoT* universe *matters*, because it exhibits modern ideologies about sexuality, gender, and violence. Much of the discourse circulates around the question of whether Sansa's rape contributed anything to the narrative arc. The stasis of the debate rests in this question of whether the rape scene develops the show's major themes and characterizations, or

whether it merely sensationalizes sexual violence against women without analyzing its implications. Each article or node of the discursive network articulates its own stance on this issue, as we have seen above. Yet looking at the network as a whole reveals something different.

One of the primary factors of the emergent argument is that its emphasis shifts from claim to consensus. While we may not be able to discern a unified claim arising from the articles discussed above, it is possible to identify the larger consensus. Though the authors may or may not agree that Sansa's rape was necessary to the *GoT* narrative, they appear to have reached the consensus that a scene of such trauma needs to be consistent with and contribute to the text's larger themes, or else it is unacceptable and destroys the text's artistic integrity. This emergent argument may not have been stated by any one author in so many words, yet it informs most or all of the individual arguments that comprise the network. A reader cannot detect this consensus just by reading one or two articles. Rather, they must expose themselves to enough of the discursive network to be able to recognize its contours, its contexts, its patterns and trends. Furthermore, this is only one emergent argument that could arise from network of ideas surrounding "Unbowed." Each hyperlinked path reveals a different set of patterns and prevalent trends. Thus the reader's choice is an integral component of the emergent argument. The emergent argument combines the reader's interest and analytical approach with wider discursive trends. The networked reading experience, then, is a sort of collaboration between the reader and the discourse community.

Other digital platforms allow for even more flexibility in the ways that arguments form. The social network Twitter, for example, limits each post to 140 characters, yet

generates complex and dynamic arguments via the hashtag function. The hashtag (#) is a way of categorizing posts based on topics or trends. Twitter users can signal that their post belongs to a certain category by attaching a hashtag, such as #feminism. Anyone can create a hashtag, and it can refer to current events, people, places, or more abstract concepts. Hashtags essentially function as searchable categories on Twitter, yet users control what appears under each tag. This leads to a diverse array of interpretations on what the given topic can mean or what kind of information it could be said to include. If enough people use a hashtag in a concentrated period of time, it is “trending” in the Twitter lexicon. In other words, momentum builds around certain ideas on Twitter, so that some topics emerge while others retreat.

Like networked reading, the experience of reading on Twitter is kinetic and exploratory. On Twitter, however, ideas are in constant motion; rather than hopping back and forth in a relatively static network of hyperlinked articles, Twitter features an ebb and flow in which some ideas expand while others recede. The Twitter feed (which has influenced the design of the Facebook news feed) also invites constant movement in the form of scrolling. While the impulse in networked reading might be to jump from one link to the next, on Twitter the reader feels compelled to continue scrolling down the feed, reading short posts that represent a constellation of interests without necessarily bearing any relationship to one another.

Twitter could be said to represent the digital environment’s paradoxical relationship to information. It generates a staggering excess of information each day in the form of Tweets, yet imposes strict limitations on what a Tweet can contain. Although each post can only contain 140 characters (and link to articles or photos), there are

approximately 500 million Tweets sent each day (“Twitter Usage Statistics” n.p.). In some ways, Twitter contains both an excess and an absence of information. There are millions upon millions of Tweets, but not all of them contain sustained arguments or even complete sentences. Yet the hashtag function grants even the pithiest Tweet the potential to house a complex idea. While Tweets may not contain full-form arguments, they can contribute to a global conversation. Thus a hashtag represents the combined thoughts of a discourse community, since they allow individual voices to tap into larger debates.

In order to assess the kind of arguments that emerge from hashtags on Twitter, I will conduct a reading of a recent controversy surrounding #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter. This hashtag began as an attempt by white women to empower themselves at the expense of women of color, posting photos of themselves with the caption #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter. The racist implications of this hashtag are glaring: #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter suggests not only that whiteness is superior to non-whiteness, but also that any celebration of white feminine beauty can function only in opposition to non-white beauty standards. Along with hashtags like #WhiteGirlWednesday and #WhiteGirlsUnited, these communities aim to set whiteness apart from other racial identities and claim its supposed superiority. While some of the posts associated with the #WhiteGirl hashtags appear tongue-in-cheek (many reference the stereotype that all white women love Starbucks Coffee, for example), they expose the racism and cultural appropriation that often goes unquestioned in white society on Twitter and beyond.^{vii}

Communities of women of color and Black Twitter soon identified the racist hashtag and repurposed it as a tool for self-empowerment. Black Twitter and other communities began to use the hashtag ironically, re-appropriating the hateful slogan to

celebrate beauty diversity. Before discussing the backlash against #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter, a note about African American communities on Twitter: Black Twitter is one of the most active, vibrant, and incisive communities on the social network. It provides an alternative outlet for news and critical commentary outside the mainstream media, which so often neglects African American voices. It has given rise to such important social movements as #BlackLivesMatter. Black Twitter users have often used the platform to discuss their experiences as African Americans and to expose everyday instances of racism on Twitter and elsewhere. Thus, Black Twitter excoriated #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter almost immediately, using its own unique brand of social critique.

Scanning through the Tweets that appear under #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter presents a wide and somewhat contradictory set of interpretations of the hashtag and its purposes. A defining characteristic of Twitter is that it does not impose a unified narrative or framework upon the information it displays; rather, it relies solely on users' methods of categorization to present Tweets. Searching a hashtag thus reveals a varied collection of Tweets and images related to the topic. A search for #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter immediately demonstrates the hashtag's ironic usage: the top of the page displays a set of photos that users have associated with the hashtag, depicting women of various skin tones and racial backgrounds. Even a reader with no knowledge of the hashtag's context would recognize that #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter is not to be taken at face value.

Twitter displays Tweets in chronological order, with most recent posts appearing at the top of the page. This means that the most current iterations of an idea, rather than the most popular, will dominate the feed. This also means that ideas tend to build on one another, replicating and developing an idea like a digital game of telephone. For instance,

the most recent Tweets under #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter at the time of this writing are as follows in Figure P:



Figure P: Tweets Posted August 17, 2015

These Tweets expand on a popular theme of the #WhiteGirls hashtag: they highlight hypocritical and racist behaviors that show that white women do not always recognize their privilege and often actively contribute to white supremacy. Viewing these Tweets in isolation does not grant full insight into the hashtag's ironic usage, however. One must keep scrolling to recognize its wider implications.

Scrolling through the feed reveals a media-rich set of Tweets ranging from sardonic humor to critical seriousness to tone-deaf non-ironic uses of the hashtag. A sample set of recent tweets in Figure Q shows the diverse and sometimes contradictory nature of posts related to the #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter trend:

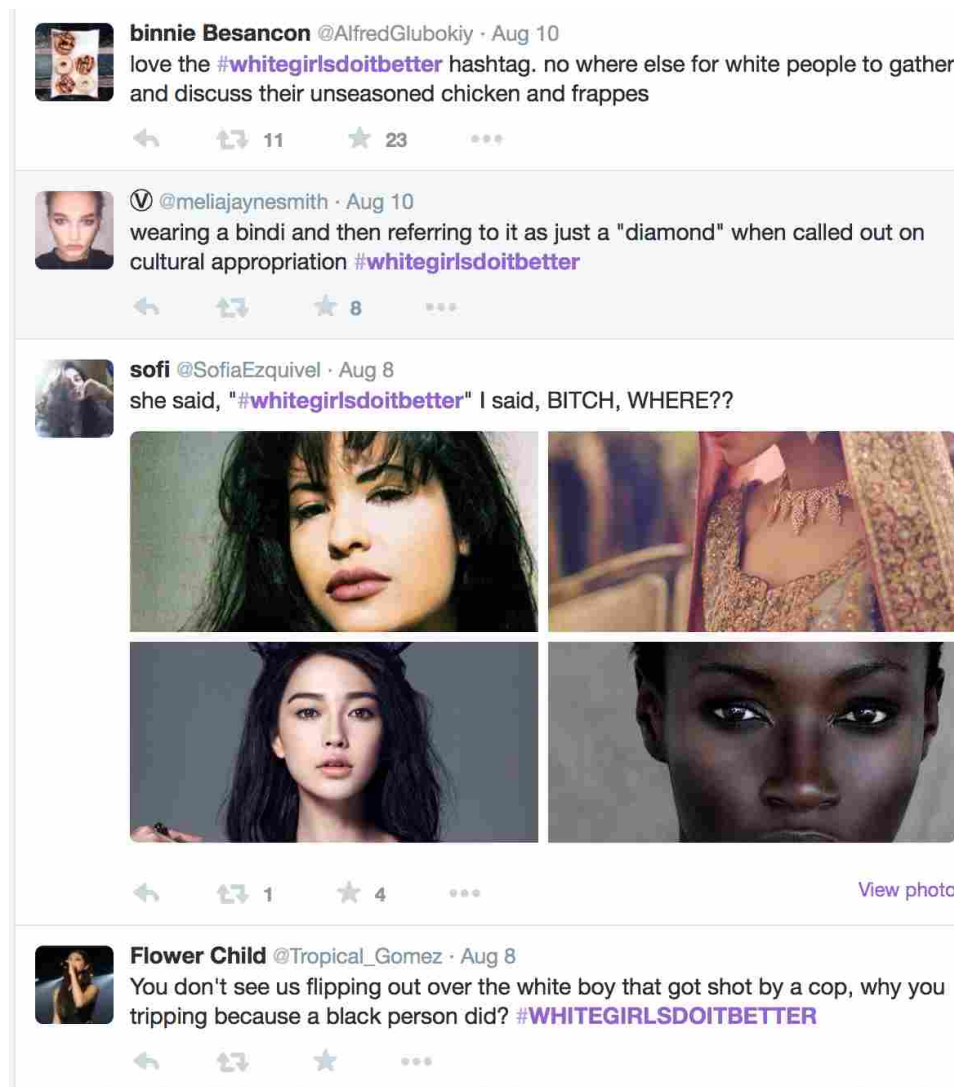


Figure Q: Series of Tweets

These tweets represent the varied approaches that Twitter users have taken in response to the #WhiteGirls phenomenon, while also beginning to unpack some of the complexity of the hashtag’s origin. The first Tweet, from “binnie Besancon,” makes humorous reference to white stereotypes (“unseasoned chicken and [Starbucks] frappes”) to suggest that white people have used the #WhiteGirls hashtag as a refuge to discuss their cultural interests (n.p.) In doing so the Tweet highlights the underlying cruelty of the

hashtag's original purpose: in American culture there is no shortage of space for white people to discuss their cultural interests, which are often aligned with the mainstream. That white women should feel the need to delineate *even more* space exclusive of black women and black culture is an example of the racism that runs to the core of white American culture.

The following Tweet works in a similar vein, referencing one of countless instances of white women taking an aspect of another culture as their own without acknowledging the complex traditions and experiences associated with it. From Native American headdresses to cornrows to bindis, white women are notorious for this kind of careless appropriation. This tweet cites the practice of wearing a bindi on the forehead without understanding its significance in the Hindu religion (pop stars Katy Perry and Selena Gomez have both worn bindis, as well as saris, to look “exotic” in their music videos). Each of the first two Tweets show that when it comes to racism and cultural appropriation, #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter.

The next Tweet in the series represents one of the most prevalent responses to the #WhiteGirls trend. In its original context, the hashtag was used to promote white beauty by posting photos or “selfies” of white women. This Tweet plays upon that trend by posting photos of women of color, suggesting that it is futile for white women to assert their superiority when there is so much to admire about non-white beauty. Scrolling through the feed turns up countless iterations of this response. Some Twitter users have criticized these responses for resorting to the same tactics of gendered competition that made the hashtag problematic in the first place. While this may be true to an extent, these images are also a large part of why the hashtag works: although white women intended

the hashtag to set themselves above and apart from women of color, these images constantly bring women of color back into visibility. The images force those who would erase women of color to *look* at them and to acknowledge that beauty takes more than one form.

The final tweet in the series is an instance of the non-ironic posts that still populate the feed. This tweet seems to suggest that the understated white response to the recent killing of a white teen by a police officer is admirable, while the black response to institutionalized police brutality against black people has been overblown. Many of the non-ironic usages of #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter seem equally ignorant to the lived realities of people of color in a racist culture, and indeed to the backlash against the hashtag itself. The feed still contains tweets like the one in Figure R below, though their numbers have dramatically decreased:



Figure R: Tweet Posted posted August 6, 2015

This tweet seems either blithely unaware of the attack against #WhiteGirls, or this user has chosen to simply ignore the controversy and to continue posting under the racist

hashtag. In either case, this tweet and others like it strikes a discordant note on a feed populated with critiques against the racism of white women. If nothing else, this tweet proves the point that Black Twitter makes by taking control of the hashtag: white people often fail to realize the implications of their actions upon other cultures, movements, and people. The hashtag's original purpose was to maintain whiteness as the default, the norm, the status quo. Black Twitter uses the hashtag to *disrupt* the status quo, reversing its effects by turning white supremacy upon itself.

Thus the reader arrives at the emergent argument of #WhiteGirlsDoItBetter: that white feminine standards of beauty have been defined only in opposition to the beauty of women of color, and that white femininity often appropriates black culture while still asserting the “supremacy” of whiteness. Black Twitter lays bare the hypocrisy behind #WhiteGirls, and responds by claiming the hashtag as a tool to fight the oppression of racism, to critique and reverse white supremacy, and to loudly proclaim that the beauty of women of color is not mutually exclusive of white beauty and that it deserves to be celebrated.

The reader only apprehends the full complexities of the #WhiteGirls trend once they have spent time scrolling through the countless tweets and images associated with it. Only by immersing themselves in the surplus of information will the reader recognize the layers of meaning associated with this hashtag; otherwise, they may not understand the message underlying the #WhiteGirls trend: The sheer number of tweets is key to the way this hashtag makes its argument: the argument coalesces gradually, through variation on a shared theme. Indeed, Black Twitter's rhetorical tactics resemble signification, or repetition with a difference.^{viii} By populating the feed with various interpretation of the

trend, Black Twitter makes a dynamic set of claims about whiteness, racism, and appropriation. The surplus of information, which may at first appear overwhelming or unconnected, is what makes the argument visible and gives it shape.

The emergent argument is a living thing, representing an evolution in the ways that people think and write in discursive space. The case studies above show that the emergent argument has no single author. It has no single text. Like the patterns and networks from which it arises, the emergent argument may expand, retract, or evolve from one day to the next. It captures the ever-shifting and media-rich set of appeals, claims and points of stasis associated with an issue— but rather than stratifying them into a rigid format, the emergent argument sets them into dynamic motion. It is not so much a result of new media tools but evidence for the co-evolution taking place between humans and writing technologies. The emergent argument is at once patterned and chaotic, impressionistic and analytic, static and kinetic. It is comprised not of a single voice but of countless individual voices joined together in a sometimes harmonious, often discordant chorus. It is evidence of social interpretation: hashtags, memes, and hyperlinks arise from a complex combination of social interconnectedness, individual creativity, and specific cultural knowledge. To understand, let alone contribute to, the emergent arguments from the case studies above, one must possess all three. Thus argumentation in digital space is not shallow or artificial, but deeply reliant upon and invested in the practice of communal reasoning.

Notes:

ⁱ A premise in this context is an expression or statement based on a shared assumption that something is true.

ⁱⁱ Roberts-Miller builds from the work of Jane Mansbridge, in her 1994 article “Using Power/Fighting Power.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The internet relies on a diverse array of database types to store its information. Each of these types categorizes its information differently depending on users’ needs. The internet itself is a “large distributed hypertext database” organized through hyperlinks (“Database” n.p.).

^{iv} Interviewee Scott Karp laments that he no longer reads books at all; Bruce Friedman says his reading feels “staccato;” Philipp Davis says he only feels the need to skim or scroll and has “little patience for long, drawn-out, nuanced arguments” (Carr 7-8).

^v See the fourth episode of *GoT* season four, titled “Oathkeeper.”

^{vi} See the article titled ““Game of Thrones’ Season 5: The Rape of Sansa Stark Pushes Fans Too Far” for a litany of social media posts expressing anger and dismay at the episode.

^{vii} Similar hashtags, like #TeamWhiteGirls and #SnowBunny, also indicate white women who are attracted to black men. These hashtags also prove problematic, as they fetishize black male sexuality without embracing all aspects of interracial relationships.

^{viii} See *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

CHAPTER V

COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND YIK YAK AS AN INVENTIVE SITE

No study of rhetoric and argumentation is complete without a consideration of composition pedagogy. The claims of the three previous chapters have unique and important implications for the teaching of college-level composition. This project is invested in discovering not just how digital communication impacts argumentation in public discourse, but also how the field of composition studies should alter or evolve its approach to accommodate these impacts. If we are to truly apprehend the emergent model of argumentation, we must assess the ways that it works in the minds of our students.

As many scholars in composition studies have pointed out, many college freshmen entering the classroom in 2016 and beyond are “digital natives.” They are permanent residents of the digital landscape and are intimately familiar with its writing technologies, so much so that they may feel more comfortable composing on their phones than on keyboard or paper. The field of composition studies readily acknowledges that students practice digital literacy, and indeed that their digital literacy may be stronger or more entrenched than other interpretive modes (close reading and long-form, expository writing, for example). However, digital literacy is now so deeply embedded into the minds and practices of our students that the term “digital literacy” does not go far enough in describing its impacts upon their ways of thinking and writing. Sarah J. Arroyo, in her book *Participatory Composition*, revisits the important work of Gregory Ulmer on the phenomenon he calls “electracy.” According to Arroyo, “electracy can be compared to digital literacy but encompasses much more: a *worldview* for civic engagement, community building, and participation (1, emphasis added). Writing in 2005, Ulmer

recognized that the increasing dominance of digital technology would represent not just a change in practices, but a change in “worldview,” a significant shift in the way people view public discourse, social relationship, and active literacy. Importantly, Ulmer calls electracy an “apparatus,” or a “social machine that influences laws and conventions in a given historical era” (1-2). Certainly the digital ecology, with its vast social, cultural and economic networks constantly accessible via mobile technologies, is nothing less than an apparatus with profound influence on the daily lives and identifications of those connected to it.

The “electracy apparatus” is now so pervasive that many of our students may not even understand what it is to live without constant access to digital technologies. Mobile technologies make it so that our students—or anyone who carries a smartphone—are never apart from their digital writing tools and the complex social and political networks in which they compose. This inseparability, this continuous state of interfacing with multiple forms of writing technology, is at the core of the claims I will make about digital discourse and composition studies. Students reside in a media-rich environment where they process appeals almost constantly. For some this comprises a complex state of being, which requires switching between modes of cognition, writing, and sociality. We now have countless methods for inscribing ourselves and our experiences, and our identities are increasingly tied up with representations of ourselves through social media. Rhetorician Cynthia Haynes puts it simply: in this posthuman world, “*everything is writing*” (Haynes qtd. in Arroyo 3). Our students are always composing, engaging complex arguments, and forming communities both real and imagined.

Students' sustained engagement with mobile networks signals a key aspect of the digital ecology: no one kind of writing can be extricated from any other. Students never step completely away from any of their writing contexts, whether it is their Facebook account, their Tumblr feed, or their ongoing text conversation with a friend. As teachers of composition, we should not expect that our students will be separate from those contexts in the classroom; in doing so, we inadvertently teach them that the kind of writing they do in the classroom is inherently different from the thinking and writing they do with mobile technologies and in social networks, which it is not. Instead, I argue that composition scholars should tap into the rich network of discursive practices in which students already exist and thrive. In short, this chapter hopes to discover ways that composition studies can enact the deepest implication of new media studies, which also informs all aspects of this dissertation: that writing, reading, and thinking are always multimodal, at least to some extent, and that no single cognitive mode or discursive practice can stand in isolation from the others.

In this chapter, I will consider what each of the previous components of the dissertation means for the theory and praxis of composition pedagogy. I frame these assertions with an emphasis upon public writing and place-based rhetorics. To illustrate the kinds of inventive opportunities made possible by emergent argumentation and its relationship to mobile technology, I will examine the social media application Yik Yak. I view Yik Yak as a meaningful site for students to articulate their identities *as* students, and to negotiate the college experience through networked writing. As I will show, Yik Yak is a semi-public space that is simultaneously imagined and grounded in place. It is a vibrant and volatile inventive site that we can utilize in composition classrooms.

Imagined communities are central to the claims of the dissertation's first chapter. This chapter traces the form and function of digital publics, looking at the ways that communities coalesce around shared interests and persist in spite of the challenges posed by the anonymity of many online discussion forums. Its ultimate claim is that a digital community must mutually agree upon the shared values and conventions governing its discourse, and that to intervene in the discourse one must first be audience to claims as they are presented by the community. "Audience" here means more than the passive reception of appeals. Instead, "audience" refers to a mindset, a deeply social state of being in which one truly *listens* to the voices of a community, seeking to understand its shared goals, its underlying assumptions, and the premises upon which its argumentation is based. Being "in audience" is an ongoing interpretive act. Indeed, electracy and its attendant mobile technologies enable the ideal conditions for audience membership, since we are never truly separate from the communities to which we belong or hope to belong. Since students carry smartphones in their pockets, they are perpetually "in audience" to any number of claims or appeals for their attention.

The first chapter also claims that because audience membership is so deeply embedded in sociality and communally-negotiated knowledge, it is no longer possible to separate the roles of author and audience. In functioning digital publics, claims arise from intimate understanding of the values and opinions of the community. This sense of audience arises from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "contact of minds:" "for argumentation to exist, an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment. There must first be agreement, in principle, on the formation of this intellectual community" (14). This agreement can only be reached once a speaker understands the

views of her audience, meaning that the speaker must become a member of the audience before she can hope to successfully persuade the community. This is because “every social circle or milieu is distinguishable in terms of its dominant opinions and unquestioned beliefs, of the premises that it takes for granted without hesitation: these views form an integral part of its culture, and an orator wishing to persuade a particular audience must of necessity adapt himself to it” (20-21). Thus the audience impacts the very creation of the “oration” or text, providing it with a social and intellectual framework that shapes its meaning and purpose. The socially-invested argument is cooperatively composed by the speaker and her audience.

This sense of audience as a socially invested state of being, as a complex and ever-shifting intellectual mode, necessitates a radical reimagining of audience in our classrooms. In composition we deploy concepts such as discourse community and public writing to make audience come alive for our students. All too often, however, audience remains an abstract and artificial notion in the composition course. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize this struggle, which still holds true today, claiming that argumentative standards like contact of minds do not “hold for someone engaged in mere essay-making, without concern for real life. Rhetoric, which has then become an academic exercise, is addressed to conventional audiences, of which such rhetoric can afford to have stereotyped conceptions” (20). The “real-life” stakes are often missing in composition classes, as much as we may try to bring exigency and vigor into our courses. How can we elevate composition so that it is not merely “an academic exercise,” so that it can no longer afford to address “conventional” and “stereotyped” audiences?

We can begin by creating space for students to negotiate multiple publics in their writing. As noted above, students belong to a rich and varied set of networks, publics and counterpublics. They are members of countless audiences and intellectual communities. Many of them intuitively understand how to switch between rhetorical modes—though they may not be aware that they do this on a daily basis. The first step in illuminating this socially-contingent view of audiences and authorship is to show that the interpretive and rhetorical work students do in social networks and digital communities is indeed rhetorical, and that the notion of audience in a composition class is not all that different from audiences they already belong to. We can start by asking students what public (and counterpublic) spheres they belong to and how conventions and argumentative practices differ. We can ask them what it means to be a part of those audiences—what assumptions do they have to understand, what are the dominant discursive modes, how does one make a successful claim? For example, students might perform a rhetorical analysis of audience membership on Facebook as opposed to Yik Yak. This does not necessarily mean that student will compose assignments via social media applications, but rather that they analyze their participation in various networks. Indeed, a pedagogy attuned to multimodal literacies will not only allow students to compose in various media, but it will also ask students to reflect critically on the process. Teachers can then bridge the gap by designing assignments that arise from questions and issues that matter within students' networks of audiences and publics.

As we revitalize our (and our students') understanding of audience as a socially-contingent state of being, we will also need to readjust writing conventions to meet new standards for argumentation. If argumentation works differently in digital space, then we

must create new pedagogical frameworks that combine digital argumentative practices with the goals of academic discourse. The second chapter of the dissertation reveals how the emphasis on sociality alters the form and practice of argumentation online. It argues that platforms such as Facebook blend communicative practices, remediating sociality and combining it with argumentation to produce discourse that is at once socially motivated yet deeply reasoned, intimate yet rigorous in its approach.

The types of writing that occur on Facebook mirror written forms all across the internet: conversational, short-form, multimodal, and timely. Rather than rejecting these practices or viewing them as distinct from academic writing, we should investigate how these writing skills might enrich or contribute to more formal writing processes. The short-form posts and comments on Facebook (which I call utterances) can be inventive and complex, and may demonstrate an understanding of audience more effectively than an academic essay composed for a first-year composition course. The question thus becomes: how do we encourage students to import their writing skills from more casual contexts into the writing classroom? Again, I do not necessarily suggest that students should complete assignments on social networks, or that the teacher rely entirely on platforms like Canvas discussion boards to replicate the experience of writing in networked settings. While this may work in some classrooms, it also threatens to become artificial in its attempts to create a dynamic writing experience. Instead, I return to the term “import” to think about how students might begin to blend composing practices. Transparency and metacommentary might be the best inroad to students’ understanding of their own range of writing skills. If we ask students to think about how their composing processes differ across platforms—how does the process for writing a status

update on Facebook differ from creating a successful tweet? How do your purposes differ?—they might see how the methods for interpretation and invention that they use on Facebook may also be effective in composing a formal essay. This is especially true in courses that teach informal reasoning. Students may not realize that the way they argue with friends on Facebook (through personal experience, hypothetical examples, and illustrative anecdotes), can transfer into the successful composition of academic arguments. This also helps them avoid an over-reliance on statistics or outside sources. Overall, critical awareness of argumentative methods on social networks can help students adapt the causal discursive modes with which they feel comfortable to the formal academic conventions which may still feel foreign to them.

Chapter Three looks more closely at digital reading practices and further describes the concept of emergent audience, claiming that arguments emerge from sustained and engaged interactions with digital communities and audiences. This chapter has perhaps the most profound implications on the teaching of written composition, since it alters our understanding of what counts as an argument and the forms that an argument can or should take. For example, the emergent argument is deeply collaborative, arising from discursive trends rather than from a single author. Functions such as Twitter hashtags combine the voices of a community to create a multifarious yet coherent argument about a shared subject. This holds true for reading and writing experiences across the web. The ability to quickly recognize patterns across large sets of data is equally important to reading deeply into a single aspect of the discourse surrounding an issue.

This means that we may need to reevaluate the kinds of reading and writing we teach in the composition classroom. If we are to redefine what counts as an argument, we must also adapt our teaching to include arguments that manifest as trends and occur across patterns. Most students are doubtlessly already familiar with emergent argumentation, though they may not recognize these discursive trends as arguments. Composition instructors can begin by helping students detect arguments that spring up around a topic. For example, rather than simply assigning print-based, long-form arguments, we can ask students to research an issue on the web and summarize the major contours of the conversation surrounding it. This can show students that it is important to synthesize what they read online, rather than simply skipping around from source to source. This also entails becoming more flexible in terms of reading instruction. Students rarely receive direct instruction in reading digital texts with a critical eye. By guiding our classes in detecting arguments that lie within trends and patterns, we are really teaching them to analyze and interpret large bodies of information. We can of course balance this with instruction in close reading, so that students recognize that the appropriate mode of reading varies based on medium and context.

Many of these suggestions build upon changes already in motion due to the public turn in composition pedagogy. Composition scholars have long been attuned to the importance of social context and collaborative reasoning in the writing course. Christian Weisser, in his 2002 book *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, claims that an increased engagement with public and civic issues can invigorate the writing course by creating stakes for writing assignments that extend beyond the bounds of the classroom. This can also increase students' ownership over

their ideas; the public turn involves not simply writing about public issues, but being able to identify one's own position within a social or political context and intervene accordingly. Weisser argues that "as compositionists, it should be our responsibility to help students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience" (107). In other words, the writing classroom is a place for students to identify and place themselves within politically situated discourses that may run counter to dominant cultural narratives. The public turn in composition studies dovetails neatly with the shift toward new media, since digital platforms provide a dynamic set of publics and counterpublics where students can voice their opinions.

The emphasis on public writing proceeds from a belief that writing is not an isolated process free from context (as some composition scholars might characterize process-based pedagogy), but rather a dynamic and collaborative act that necessarily arises from the needs and goals of a community. Lance Massey and Richard Gephardt characterize this shift into "post-process" pedagogy in their 2010 introduction to *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition: Contemporary Perspectives*. This entails a move away from writing as a relatively unified set of practices, toward writing as a fundamentally *human act*, constitutive of culture and identity (Massey and Gephardt 1-9). The turn toward post-process marks an integral shift in the field of composition, as it indicates a mistrust of any single methodology for teaching writing and embraces multiplicity, interdisciplinarity, even contradiction. The emphasis on public writing echoes this perspective by placing student writing into specific political contexts and endorsing participation in multiple discourses. The social, political, and highly contextual

nature of new media writing practices blends naturally with the imperatives of the post-process era.

The field of composition has related interests in place- and space-based pedagogies. If public writing is concerned with public, private, and counterpublic spheres, then place-based writing examines the role that space and location play in comprising these spheres. In the introduction to their 2007 anthology *The Locations of Composition*, Christopher Keller and Christian Weisser describe the importance of place in composition studies: “Composition is structured by various kinds of places physical and imagined, neither of which should be privileged, both of which should be investigated, because places are imagined, arranged, represented, and distributed in discourse and texts” (2). The literal and metaphorical places of composition—the classroom, the campus, students’ social networks and the spheres into which they write—make up a complex geography that continually shifts and evolves. Considering composition through the lens of place allows scholars to examine the situated-ness of the field, to understand its place within the larger context of this geography. Critical engagement with the way place is represented in our pedagogy can help us to see how place relates to thinking, writing, and academic discourse.

Considerations of place in the composition classroom can also attune students to their own situated-ness in cultural geographies and social networks. This can take several forms: students might perform analyses of the construction of public places, theorize the kinds of literal and physical places they inhabit on a daily basis, or discuss local issues as a way to engage the places that surround them. Students might also think about the places where they write. This could refer either to the physical locations they select when

writing their essays, or to the literal or metaphorical places in which their writing exists—a diary, a blog, a social network, a word processor, and so on. Students can begin to understand the physical impact that texts (including their own) can have upon places, and vice versa. Turning a meta-critical eye toward the places that make up students’ writing lives can help them recognize that writing is always embedded in a partially embodied, partially imagined terrain.

With the ubiquity of mobile technology, students carry many of these writing “places” along with them on their phones. They may be logged in to any number of social networks or communication apps, each of which opens up its own world of commitments, conventions, and contexts. If we let them, these mobile writing places can enrich, rather than detract from, the goals of the composition course. After all, when students interact with these applications, they switch between rhetorical modes and adapt their language to the goals of the discourse. Social networks and other apps could constitute an effective yet accessible inroad to place-based composition, as well. While we might view mobile applications as metaphorical places where students “go” to communicate with friends and negotiate identity, many apps also include literal manifestations of place as well. More and more mobile apps combine geographical location with digital networks, comprising a complex notion of “place” that is at once embodied and imagined.

The relatively new, and decidedly controversial, social media app Yik Yak represents this middle ground between physical and imaginary. Yik Yak is an anonymous, mobile-based social media application founded in 2013 by Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington (Mahler n.p.). It is an online discussion board that displays posts

based on geographical location. It centers mainly around college campuses and areas with a large population in the 18-24 demographic. Yik Yak shows all posts written within a five-mile radius, based on the GPS location of the user's smartphone. The Yik Yak community associated with a given geographical area is known as the "herd." Though students have the option of setting their "herd" so that they can still access the college's feed while away for vacation, the app remains focused on physical location over the kinds of considerations that characterize most social media applications. There are no usernames or profile pages. Posts and comments are not attributed to any particular user, so that it is not possible to tell who made what post, or even if the same user has authored multiple posts. Yik Yak runs on a system of upvotes and downvotes comparable to Reddit. If a post or comment reaches a downvote score of -5, it automatically disappears. Posts with the most upvotes appear on the "Hot" feed; the user can choose to display Yaks sorted chronologically or by popularity. Users can also "peek," but not participate, in Yik Yak feeds across the world.

Yik Yak is not the first mobile application to link content to geographical location. For example, programs like Foursquare allow users to "check in" at locations based on their geographical locations and submit "tips" about local restaurants or other public spaces. Online dating apps like Tinder display profiles based on physical proximity. Indeed, mobile technologies have altered the ways that people interact with the digital. The digital world once appeared separate from the "real" physical world. But as Jordan Frith has noted, "rather than replace the importance of the physical world, the digital instead merged with the physical" (44). In his article "Writing space: Examining the potential of location-based composition," Frith argues that mobile technologies enrich

the experience of physical space by added a digital, textual layer. Citing Adriana de Souza e Silva, Frith argues that applications like Foursquare create “hybrid spaces,” which is “a space that merges social connections, digital information, and physical space” (47). By supplementing public places with tips, recommendations, and reviews, applications like Foursquare add social and narrative components to physical locations. For Frith, this means that urban spaces “can be made legible,” even to people outside the community (48). As the digital realm continues to merge with physical space, more and more opportunities arise to write the world into legibility.

Many have compared Yik Yak to an anonymous version of Twitter, or even to a digital version of the graffiti on a bathroom stall. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its anonymity, Yik Yak has been known to spawn racist, misogynist, and otherwise hateful speech. For example, only days before the time of this writing, a coalition of women’s and civil rights groups called for the application to be shut down, due to hate speech targeted at a feminist group at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia (Schmidt n.p.). Yik Yak users made threats of sexual violence against feminists, which the women’s coalition says were largely ignored by university officials. The University of Mary Washington, and other colleges before it, claim there is little to be done to stop harassment on Yik Yak due to its anonymity. While some schools have banned the application on their WiFi networks, this action is mostly symbolic since students can still access the app via cellular data (Mahler n.p.). Even further, some officials have argued that banning the application would threaten First Amendment rights.

The problems with Yik Yak are the same problems that arise in other anonymous venues for communication, such as 4Chan. The local nature of Yik Yak could be said to

compound the issue, since it is possible for people to make anonymous threats or harassing comments about people in close physical proximity. Yik Yak now takes precautions that limit attacks on particular individuals or locations: it prohibits names, addresses, or photos of faces from being posted, and detects potentially offensive language. There may, of course, be ways to subvert these precautions, just as the act of banning the application on a university WiFi network may be merely symbolic. Yet these precautions, and the relative ease with which users can subvert them, say a lot about the way that Yik Yak functions. It can only proceed based on some sort of communicative “honor system,” based on a general sense of trust that people will follow guidelines for ethical discourse and will not abuse the protection that anonymity can provide.

Similarly to groups on Reddit mentioned in Chapter 1, Yik Yak is a self-regulating community. As on Reddit, the upvote/downvote function allows community members to determine what kinds of content they want to see. But unlike Reddit, Yaks with a score of -5 get deleted from the feed. In the University of Oregon Yik Yak feed, posts and comments containing offensive or harassing content often get deleted quickly. Fortunately, the most offensive posts do not remain visible for long. This is not to say that they are not harmful or that they have no impact on the Yik Yak community. As we will discuss in the case study below, hurtful Yaks reveal the insidious nature of racism and misogyny on college campuses and have lasting effects on students in minority groups. Anonymity can, and very often does, lead to trolling and other harassing behaviors. This means that Yik Yak communities must find ways to subvert the efforts of those people who abuse its anonymity. In other words, Yik Yak’s anonymity necessitates

self-policing. This local yet anonymous community is forced to operate based on mutual trust, seeking agreement on the purposes of the discourse.

Yik Yak does much of the same interpretive work as the applications mentioned above, but because it is both local and anonymous, Yik Yak's content is tied to place but also remains partially abstract. Though discussions occasionally focus on specific locations such as restaurants, campus buildings, or classes, more often they reveal sentiments arising from campus life in general. Unlike other location-based applications like Foursquare, Yik Yak does not explicitly tie users to geographical locations or encourage them to create social networks based on location. Rather, it comprises an interpretive sphere that is based on proximity, shared experience, and local knowledge. In many cases it reveals what is latent or unrecognizable through physical interaction on a campus. Yik Yak's anonymity allows people to express attitudes they may not otherwise feel comfortable sharing face-to-face. While some of posts may be harassing or hateful in nature, most of the time they take the form of confessions, frustrations, or vulnerabilities arising from campus life. In this sense, Yik Yak becomes a space to negotiate student identity through text.

The popularity of Yik Yak on college campuses suggests that students are invested in figuring themselves in relationship to their school and their community. The app could be compared to a digital bulletin or discussion board, where students can communicate about campus life and the struggles and joys of being in college. Anonymity often leads to a commiserative and friendly tone—the app, compared to other social media applications that use profiles, is less reliant on signifiers of age, class, and social standing, so that students can relate to one another separately from the markers that

frame other experiences on campus. While this discursive environment can lead to cyberbullying, it also provides a space for participants to play with identity and make light of the sometimes painful experience of being a college student.

Posts on Yik Yak range widely in tone, encompassing the humorous, the political, the confessional, and the satirical. Relatability is a major characteristic of popular posts on Yik Yak. Popular posts tend toward playful renderings of the college life. These “relatable” Yaks encapsulate the difficulties of being a college student in an exasperated yet joking tone. For example, Figures S and T below represent Yik Yak’s penchant for the relatable characterizations of the student lifestyle:

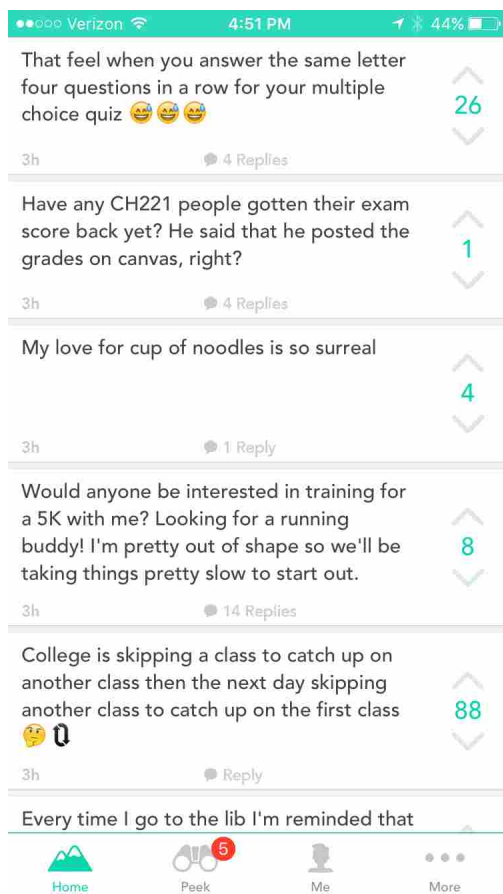


Figure S



Figure T

The posts above hit upon several popular topics on Yik Yak: troubles with classes, the travails of dating, and the temptations of procrastination, to name a few. These posts appear chronologically, showing the most popular Yaks alongside others posted around the same time. The posts with the most votes target the difficulties and anxieties of student life. For example, the first Yak in Figure A addresses the paranoia of “[answering] the same letter four questions in a row” on a quiz, while another remarks on the cyclic nature of skipping class in order to catch up on school work. These posts speak to the shared experience of attending college, creating space for people to share their frustrations, confess their bad studying habits, and make light of the everyday struggles that make college life so difficult.

On Yik Yak, people imagine and reimagine what it means to be a college student. It allows students to shape their school’s identity and position themselves in relationship to it. Often, this playful representation of college life stands in opposition to the outward appearance of the successful university student. It is a space for the student who may appear to be handling the challenges of college with ease to share their vulnerabilities and perceived failures. For example, in remarking that they are “part of the 1% that doesn’t own a mac book,” one Yakker perceives a class-based disconnect between themselves and the rest of the student population. Yik Yak is rife with such commentary on the economic and social conditions on campus; it is not simply a place to relate personal problems, but also to comment on their connection to larger issues of student life. Participants often express their struggles with depression and anxiety as well, which suggests that Yik Yak can function as a safe space where students can relate the darker

sides of university life. The application thus reveals the underlying apprehensions, investments, and concerns of a student community.

Indeed, Yik Yak addresses more than just the harmless frivolities of daily life as a college student. Debates about issues of race and identity play out on this application as well. At the time of this writing, the University of Oregon organization Black Women of Achievement hosted a Black Lives Matter march on campus in response to racial conflicts occurring at the University of Missouri. Many posts expressed solidarity with the movement: one such post, with 51 upvotes, reads “To the students of color at Mizzou, we, students of color at the University of Oregon, stand with you in solidarity. To those who would threaten your sense of safety, we are watching. #Insolidarity” (Nov. 12 2015 1:44 pm n.p.). Unfortunately, others chimed in with words of racism and hate. For example, one short-lived post read the following: “black lives don’t matter #escapedfromthezoo” (Nov. 12 2015 2:35 pm n.p.). It was displayed for less than a minute before receiving five downvotes. Similarly, a post reading “Blacks want racism to end but they’re all still using the N word” was voted off in about a minute (Nov. 12 2015 2:37 pm n.p.).

The way that these Yaks appear, only to disappear just as quickly, reveals something about the insidious and slippery nature of racism on a purportedly liberal and progressive college campus. The remarks cannot be attributed to any one individual; they cannot even be located once they have been voted off the feed. So much like racism itself, these Yaks exist just beneath the surface of campus culture, breaking out in moments of tension only to disappear before they can be identified or named. Thus what is so empowering about Yik Yak becomes equally dangerous: it provides a safe space to

express latent attitudes without repercussion. It erases racism from the public forum, which is another way of protecting it—the hateful comments get removed, but not before people read them. The existence of racism is revealed, but not for long enough that we can call it by its true name. Thus racism, on Yik Yak and on campuses nationwide, persists in the shadows while its repercussions wreak their havoc in the light of day.

Although they were visible for such a short time, these posts had a lasting and serious impact on the University of Oregon’s Yik Yak community. The post and comments below appeared in response to these hateful Yaks, depicted in Figures U-X:



Figure U

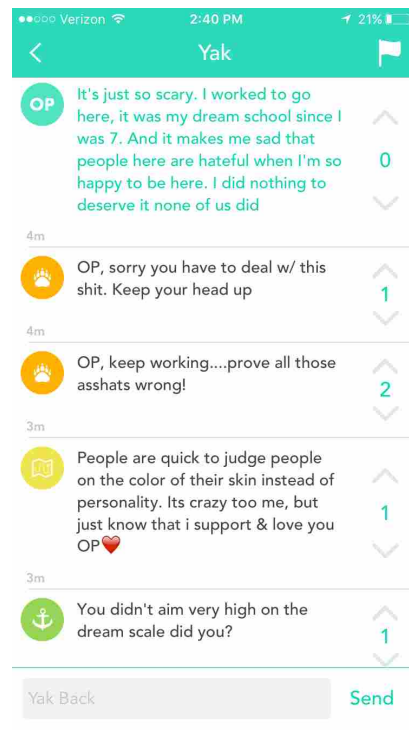


Figure V

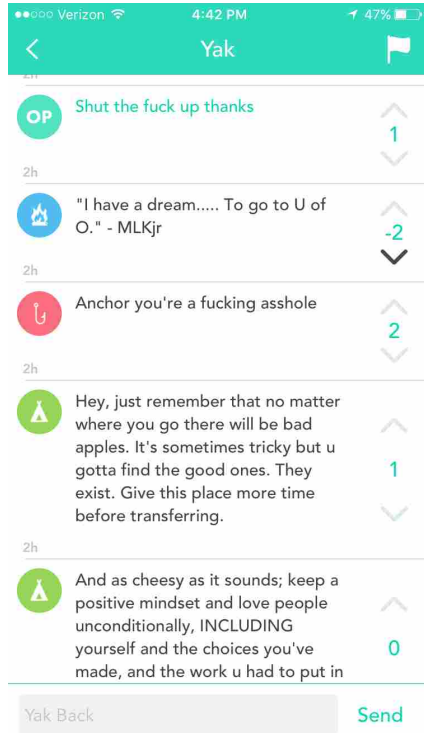


Figure W

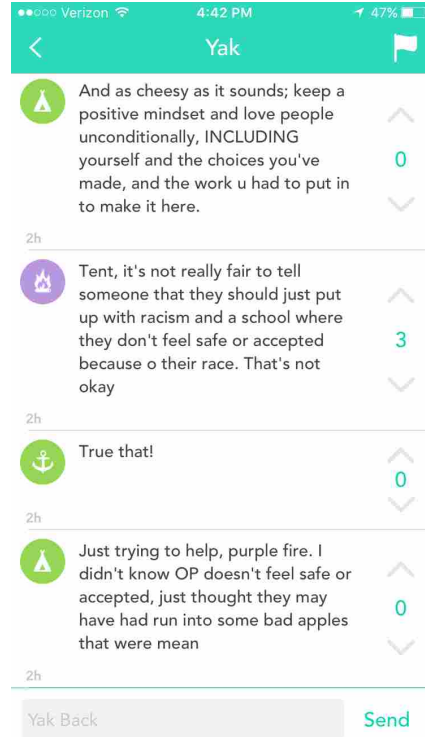


Figure X

The original post expresses sadness, frustration, and disappointment in a campus community that has betrayed its students of color (Figure U). The ensuing discussion encapsulates all that is empowering and problematic about Yik Yak. Most respondents relate support and sympathy, which are encouraging even if they reveal some naïve bewilderment about the persistence of racism (see “People are quick to judge...” in Figure V). Others convey astute observations about the nature of racism at a supposedly progressive school like the University of Oregon. One commenter remarks that “Oregon has this rep of being really liberal, but it’s actually pretty racist here” (Figure U). These posts show the potential for the Yik Yak community to provide solidarity and support for its marginalized members.

Yet the conversation is not free from the hurtful influences plaguing the larger Yik Yak feed. Some abuse the anonymous context by further alienating the author of the

original post. Two separate respondents target the author's comment which reveals that s/he always dreamed of attending the University of Oregon (Figure V). One sarcastically asks "You didn't aim very high on the dream scale did you" (Figure V), while another makes the blatantly racist comment "I have a dream...to go to U of O'—MLKjr" (Figure W). These Yaks function much like the hurtful posts mentioned above. They get voted off rather quickly, so that later versions of the comments section show peoples' reactions to the hateful responses without showing the responses themselves. This means that they exert their damaging influence, but a full dialogue cannot really exist since the hurtful comments disappear. Thus, racism becomes a specter that haunts discussions on Yik Yak without showing its true face.

Other comments exhibit the insidious nature of racism at UO, but are not so offensive that they disappear from the feed entirely. In Figure W, a commenter gives a pseudo-inspirational pep talk to the author of the original post. This comment attributes racism to a few "bad apples," placing the onus on the author to "find the good ones" within a hostile environment and to maintain a positive attitude about themselves and their choices (Figure X). This pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps narrative is a typical response; it is easier to ascribe the problem of racism to a few "bad apples" and place the responsibility for solving racism onto its victims instead of its perpetrators. This part of the discussion ends up being more fruitful, however, since the problematic comment remains visible long enough for someone to make a substantial response. Another participant intervenes to point out that "it's not really fair to tell someone they should just put up with racism" or lack of acceptance and safety based on race (Figure X). In doing so, this participant reveals a micro-aggression that is equally insidious, if not as blatantly

hurtful, as the macro-aggressions of the comments that got voted off so quickly. This allows for a deeper consideration of what counts as racism, as well as how to deal appropriately with everyday instances of racism on college campuses.

The discussion above is largely a reflection on racism, but it is also a negotiation of identity through campus community. The author of the original post cannot commensurate her or his self-perception as a UO student with the hateful and racist images perpetuated through Yik Yak. S/he links this directly with her membership to the campus community; the student expresses a desire to transfer as a way to escape a toxic environment. The author extends this sentiment in their comment in Figure V, in which s/he compares the lifelong dream of attending University of Oregon with its painful and disappointing reality. Other commenters also relate the problem of racism to school identity. One contrasts the perception of Oregon as a liberal bastion with its racist realities, while another expresses shame at being in a student body where such behaviors exist (Figure V). Even the racist comments do this, showing their skepticism of the value of a University of Oregon education along with an ignorance of the institutional racism that stacks the deck against students of color.

One may not perceive these attitudes the first time they view the Yik Yak feed, however. Yik Yak reveals the latent value systems and ideological commitments of the populations that use it—and it does this through emergent argumentation. A reader only begins to understand the running jokes, the complaints, the moments of discord and agreement that shape the “herd’s” discourse, once they have spent enough time to recognize its larger trends and rhetorical patterns. These patterns are not determined by any one Yak or any single exchange; rather, they come into existence gradually, through

the continual participation of the community. For example, certain “inside jokes” gain momentum on the feed, functioning somewhat like memes that become “viral” as people share and repost. But while memes tend to arise at the national or even global level via the internet at large, Yik Yak’s jokes and trends arise at the local level. Its memes, trends, and jokes only make sense to members of a particular “herd,” so that Yik Yak users must have at least some localized knowledge in order to fully understand the discourse. Thus, Yik Yak relates an emergent sense of student culture.

This example shows that even the most heated political conversations on Yik Yak are never far removed from the collective (if often antagonistic and harmful) negotiation of student identity. Yik Yak provides an integral space for students to work through what it means to be a college student, how to position oneself within a community while also exerting a sense of individuality. Its discourse is always messy, often misguided, and sometimes downright reprehensible. Yet it is precisely this messiness, and indeed this reprehensibility, that calls for critical attention. Yik Yak’s volatile and value-laden rhetoric reflects students’ engagement with difficult political and social issues. If nothing else, Yik Yak shows that problems of race, gender, and class are wrapped up in they ways that people perceive themselves not only as students, but as individuals. This is, of course, not a new claim, but Yik Yak provides a new lens through which to view the ongoing and collective negotiation of college student identity. It is also worth mentioning that countless numbers of our students are already participating in discourse on apps like Yik Yak. These anonymous conversations will proceed, with or without our attention. Surely it is worthwhile to help students critically read the discourses in which they participate every day.

Even if we agree that Yik Yak is a worthwhile pedagogical tool and subject for analysis in composition studies, there is no single way to approach or utilize the application, whether in research or in the classroom. Its multifaceted, chaotic, and rather slippery discourse makes it difficult to isolate what is useful from what is merely offensive or sensationalist. And perhaps this is one of the most valuable lessons that Yik Yak can teach, for so much of the internet poses this precise problem. What we must avoid, and what our students must avoid as well, is approaching Yik Yak as if it contains a single kind of discourse or provides a unified view into any issue. We must take all of the facets of Yik Yak's discourse into account; we cannot afford to judge it based on "typical" moments where it appears to do no harm. Yet on the other hand, we cannot dismiss or shut down Yik Yak based solely on its worst moments. Just as we cannot ignore its role on propagating racism, sexism, and hatred on college campuses, we must also assess its capacity to do the painful yet necessary work of navigating student identity. To this end, we must judge—and utilize—Yik Yak for what it is: a fertile and volatile testing ground for ideas, identities, and political positions.

Yik Yak is in essence an inventive site. It shows how students can thrive in the middle ground between the local and the anonymous, between the imagined and the real. Students are already experimenting with ideas in this semi-public forum outside the classroom, so perhaps it is possible to bring that experimentation into the writing class as well. After all, Yik Yak is one of students' many writing contexts, and we need not separate it from the aims or the content of the writing course. Yik Yak might be a way of importing local contexts and questions into the writing class. This does not mean that teachers should evaluate students' contributions to Yik Yak. Instead, Yik Yak could

illuminate the kinds of conversations taking place across campus. For instance, Yik Yak could serve as a supplement to class discussions. Students could ask questions on the app that pertain to course content, perhaps submitting some commentary on the results or using it as evidence in their essay. Students might also use Yik Yak as a way to identify stasis in the campus community, identifying topics that matter to the university as a discourse community or intervening into a question that garners dissension. Yik Yak can both provoke and reveal stasis, making it a particularly useful tool in the composition classroom.

Using Yik Yak might also encourage students to directly examine the sorts of discourses—whether problematic or productive—that shape the culture of their campus. The example above provides a unique lens into the persistence of racism at the University of Oregon, which proves especially important on a campus that often subverts or denies its continuing problems with racism and sexism. Discussions like the one above expose the cruelest impulses of the campus community, but they also present an opportunity for critique. Asking students to write analyses of the hateful discourse they find on Yik Yak or other social media would be a way of removing racism and sexism from the shadows. Rather than condoning or ignoring these harmful moments on Yik Yak, teachers could ask students to take screen shots when they encounter racist or sexist comments, in order to record such discourse and open it to critique. In response papers or discussion, students could then analyze the comment or compare it to experiences they have had on campus. Not only would this expose latent hatred, but it would also allow students to reflect on the impact such language can have on a campus community and the individuals of which it is comprised.

By that same token, students can analyze moments on Yik Yak when participants encourage one another, attempt to combat racism, or simply commiserate about the college experience. Analysis of the app need not be confined to its negative aspects, but rather can explore how the community remains supportive and strong in spite of its problems. Students might look for instances where cohesive and respectful dialogue persists even when interrupted by hateful comments—how does the community respond to, confront, or elide hate speech, if at all? Classes might also explore the central issues driving discussions on Yik Yak as a way to analyze student culture as expressed through the app. How do students on a particular campus characterize student life, and how might that differ from other conceptions of what it means to be a college student? These questions can lead to student writing that is personally resonant, publically oriented, and engaged with local concerns.

By asking students to reflect on their own community this way, we lead students toward critical awareness of the role of social media in inscribing identity and positioning oneself within a cultural context. Not only that, but we validate the important interpretive work that occurs on social applications like Yik Yak. Incorporating social media into composition pedagogy is one of the best ways to enact the most recent changes in composition pedagogy. Not only does it acknowledge the role of place, identity, and self-representation in the writing process, but it also accounts for the multimodality and interconnectedness of all forms of discourse. Students participation on social networks informs the way they think about political and cultural issues, and the composition class should encourage them to integrate modes of thinking that traditionally take place outside the classroom into an academic context. Rather than banishing mobile or social

applications from our classrooms, we should integrate, and perhaps even celebrate, the interpretive and intellectual work taking place there.

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