REMEDIATING DEMOCRACY: YOUTUBE AND THE VERNACULAR RHETORICS OF WEB 2.0

Erin Dietel-McLaughlin

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

Committee:
Kristine Blair, Advisor
Louisa Ha
Graduate Faculty Representative
Michael Butterworth
Lee Nickoson
ABSTRACT

Kristine Blair, Advisor

This dissertation examines the extent to which composing practices and rhetorical strategies common to “Web 2.0” arenas may reinvigorate democracy. The project examines several digital composing practices as examples of what Gerard Hauser (1999) and others have dubbed “vernacular rhetoric,” or common modes of communication that may resist or challenge more institutionalized forms of discourse. Using a cultural studies approach, this dissertation focuses on the popular video-sharing site, YouTube, and attempts to theorize several vernacular composing practices. First, this dissertation discusses the rhetorical trope of irreverence, with particular attention to the ways in which irreverent strategies such as new media parody transcend more traditional modes of public discourse. Second, this dissertation discusses three approaches to video remix (collection, Detournement, and mashing) as political strategies facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, with particular attention to the ways in which these strategies challenge the construct of authorship and the power relationships inherent in that construct. This dissertation then considers the extent to which sites like YouTube remediate traditional rhetorical modes by focusing on the genre of epideictic rhetoric and the ways in which sites like YouTube encourage epideictic practice. Finally, in light of what these discussions reveal in terms of rhetorical practice and democracy in Web 2.0 arenas, this dissertation offers a concluding discussion of what our “Web 2.0 world” might mean for composition studies in terms of theory, practice, and the teaching of writing.
For my daughter, Kennedy, so she might always remember that no dream is out of reach.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many talented colleagues I have been privileged to work with at Bowling Green State University. I am especially indebted to my advisor, Dr. Kristine Blair, whose scholarly expertise, collegiality, and generosity of spirit have sustained me throughout the course of this project, not to mention my entire graduate career. I am also grateful for the support of my committee members, Dr. Michael Butterworth, Dr. Louisa Ha, and Dr. Lee Nickoson, as well as Dr. Sue Carter Wood, who sparked my interest in the historical connections between literacy and citizenship. My writing of this dissertation was made possible by way of a generous fellowship awarded by the BGSU English Department, for which I remain extremely thankful. I also appreciate the ongoing camaraderie of my fellow graduate students, whose feedback on abstracts, proposals, research presentations, potential video examples, and chapter drafts kept my thinking focused and renewed my enthusiasm for the project. Finally, I offer my deepest thanks to colleagues Brittany Cottrill and Callista Buchen, who spent many hours lovingly entertaining my infant daughter when mommy had to write.

Outside of BGSU, I offer my sincere thanks to participants in the Research Network Forum at the 2008 Rhetoric Society of America conference, especially Dr. Edward Schiappa and Matt Weiss, whose feedback was particularly valuable during my initial research on irreverence and the CNN-YouTube Debates. This dissertation also benefitted from feedback offered by guest editors Dr. Randall McClure and Dr. Michael Palmquist on an article published in the Web 2.0 issue of Computers and Composition Online (which evolved into Chapter 2 of this dissertation).

Less evident, yet no less significant, are the contributions made by many extraordinary people who in various ways made a Ph.D. seem possible for me. Thanks especially to Dr. “Uncle
Jay” Moynahan, whose unwavering support, sincerity, and generosity carried me through most of my college career. I am forever indebted to the expert counsel and resources offered by Dr. Karen McKinney and the McNair Scholars Program at Eastern Washington University, as well as Stefanie Pettit, Khalil Islam-Zwart, and Dr. Anthony Flinn, all of whom supported my writing and encouraged me to pursue graduate education. Thanks also to the many people over the years who, in ways big and small, have been my cheerleaders, coaches, and role models. This list includes Genevieve Cody, Tambra Ostrander, Ashley Koedding, Joe V., Shawn McBride, Leah “Daks” Furman, Guy Barker, Daryl “Rorik” Mahoney, Michael and Darcy Allen, Perry Sanders, Ann Martinson, Tom and Julie Stehr, Rube Wrightsman, and Robey Reed. Thank you for believing in me, even when I didn’t.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank my family for their unconditional love and support during my writing of this dissertation and my entire educational journey. Words cannot express the profound gratitude I feel toward my wonderful husband, whose patience and steadfast support brought me through more than one writing-induced meltdown. Thanks to my mom, who has always challenged me to follow my dreams, even when they seem impossibly out of reach. Thanks to my sister, who inspires me to be a good role model every day and to finish what I begin. And, of course, thanks to my amazing daughter for putting it all in perspective. Thank you so much, everyone, for everything. I simply would not be here without you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER I. A CASE FOR THEORIZING VERNACULAR RHETORIC IN ONLINE DISCOURSE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YouTube as Web 2.0 Case Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Public Sphere and Rhetorical Democracy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet as Public Sphere</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Technologies, Literacy, and Citizenship</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Media, Digital Literacies, and Democracy</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating Vernacular Rhetorics</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical Ramifications</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Goals and Research Questions</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER II. DESTROYED WITH LAUGHTER: IRREVERENT COMPOSITIONS AND THE POLITICS OF NEW MEDIA PARODY</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Rhetoricity of the Parody Genre</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreverence and Articulation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreverence, Intertextuality, and Subversive Literacies</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Cultural Moment: Political Divisiveness and the Proliferation of New Media</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreverent Composition and the CNN-YouTube Debates</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreverent Composition as Resistance</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Cautions</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER III. PIRATES AND PUBLICS: DIGITAL REMIX VIDEO AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORSHIP

62

The Myth of the Solitary Author and the Unified Text

64

Copyright and Fair Use in the Digital Age

69

Pirates and Policing

72

Politics, Digital Culture, and Mass Media

74

Collection as Authorship: The “Gay Rights” PostSecret Slideshow

76

Detournement as Oppositional Text: “So You Think You Can Be President?”

81

Down the Rabbit Hole: “Mashing” and the Future of Authorship

84

Remix as Resistant Cultural Production

88

Limitations

90

Conclusion

91

CHAPTER IV. PRIVATE TRUTH, PUBLIC VIDEO, AND THE PEDAGOGY OF DISPLAY:

BEHOLDING YOUTUBE’S EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

93

Epideictic Rhetoric: Definitions and Departures

99

An Aesthetic of Values

100

Remediating Epideictic Rhetoric

102

“Broadcast Yourself”: YouTube’s Epideictic Spirit

104

The “Noise” of the Beholding Audience

108

Seeing is Believing: Showing Off and Showing Forth

111

A Moment in Time: Video and Temporal Tensions of Epideictic

115

Conclusion

116
CHAPTER V. THE FUTURE OF LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY IN A WEB 2.0 WORLD

.................................................................122

Speaking Back: The Spirit of Web 2.0 .................................................................123

Summary of Chapter Findings .............................................................................130

Remediation as Reform .......................................................................................133

Remediating Theory .........................................................................................134

Remediating Pedagogy .....................................................................................137

Practicing What We Preach: Web 2.0 and the Public Intellectual ...................144

Confronting the Culture of Fear .........................................................................145

Conclusion ..........................................................................................................147

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................150
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cover of December 2006 issue of <em>Time Magazine</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Image from the 2007 CNN-YouTube Debates</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Screen Capture of Billiam the Snowman</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Screen Capture of “Gay Rights” Slideshow</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Web 2.0” Tag Cloud</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I. A CASE FOR THEORIZING VERNACULAR RHETORIC IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

While I have on some level been interested in the intersections of technology, literacy, identity, and community since I was twelve years old, my more recent, scholarly interest in these areas can be attributed in large part to a casual glance at a popular magazine. In December of 2006, when I was halfway through my second year of graduate study, *Time Magazine* boldly announced their “2006 Person of the Year” with the cover shown in figure 1 below, which took many readers (including myself) by surprise:

![Figure 1: December 2006 cover of Time Magazine](http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20061225,00.html)

By naming “you” its 2006 “Person of the Year,” *Time* was formally acknowledging the continued impact of Internet technologies on virtually all aspects of life in an increasingly globalized culture. Specifically, the recognition of a collective, abstract, yet seemingly empowered “you” was a nod to a dramatic shift in communication and knowledge-sharing.
practices—the development and widespread popularity of Web sites and Internet applications revolving around user participation and user-created content. In contrast to its “read-only” predecessor, this “new” Internet (hereafter referred to as “Web 2.0”) emphasized interactivity, networking, authoring, tagging, peer-to-peer sharing, and decentralized structures (see O’Reilly; McAfee), thereby revolutionizing the way that people accessed information and communicated with one another. The Web was no longer just a place for consuming; it was now also a place for creating, for sharing, and ultimately, for participating, in any number of ways.

While this shift did not occur overnight, it has only been in the past few years that the political ramifications of Web 2.0 have started to be publicly acknowledged by corporate, government, and media institutions. The Time article, for example, congratulates Internet participants “for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game” (Grossman, “Time’s Person of the Year”). And while the article cautions against being overly romantic about the so-called “wisdom-of-the-crowds” by noting that Web 2.0 technologies harness “the stupidity of crows as well as its wisdom,” readers of that article were nevertheless invited to see how their Wikipedia editing, Facebook and MySpace profile constructing, YouTube video creating, and so on were having a very real effect on the cultural and political landscape. As the article continues, “[Web 2.0] is an opportunity to build a new kind of international understanding, not politician to politician, great man to great man, but citizen to citizen, person to person. It's a chance for people to look at a computer screen and really, genuinely wonder who's out there looking back at them.” In this way, the Time article reflects tensions between the participants driving Web 2.0 and the powerful cultural institutions who were beginning to see how power relationships (in theory) were changing. At the same time, major questions were being asked about the role that the new
digital citizen would play in online and offline arenas and what the resulting political, economic, ontological, and epistemological consequences might be.

Thus, the *Time* article was, to some degree, the impetus for the trajectory of research that has led me to write this dissertation. It has been more than three years since I first encountered that magazine cover, but the questions emerging from that issue of the popular magazine are far from answered; instead, these same questions persist and give way to even more questions on the part of laypeople and specialists alike. Social networking sites and other Web 2.0 environments struggle to meet the needs and expectations of users who demand a voice in site policy-making (most recently seen in Facebook users’ outcry in response to changes in terms of service and content ownership; Facebook subsequently reverted to the old terms of use and installed a system for allowing users to discuss and vote on changes to site policy) (Berte). In rhetoric and composition studies, scholars have begun to question what Web 2.0 means for both rhetorical practice and issues of literacy. Scholars such as Gail Hailwisher, Jay David Bolter, Stuart Selber, Cynthia Selfe, Anne Wysocki, and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, to name just a few, have led the effort by compositionists to understand the impact that evolving Internet technologies hold for processes of reading and writing, identity construction, and community-building, and the extent to which writing instructors must pay attention to these processes in order to keep composition courses relevant in an increasingly multimodal society.

While it would be impossible for a single project to fully unpack these issues, my hope is that this dissertation contributes to the ongoing effort to understand and theorize digital rhetoric(s) by providing another layer of insight into the ways that “ordinary” people are harnessing Web 2.0 technologies for composing purposes that may be at once rhetorical, epistemic, and political in nature. Specifically, this project illuminates some of the emerging
modes of discourse that are at work in these spaces and the kinds of literacies that are necessary to those rhetorical practices. Additionally, this project extends and complicates existing work on rhetorical practices of the public sphere by situating Web 2.0 as being a lively discursive arena, rich with the multiplicity, tension, and challenges that we should expect from a democracy. Finally, this dissertation highlights the powerful connections between digital literacy and citizenship and explores the implications of these issues for rhetorical practice, literacy instruction, and the specific site of the composition classroom. These broad goals are deeply grounded not only in my personal experiences as a consumer and critic of technology, but also in my scholarly and pedagogical commitment to studying and theorizing the discursive practices of digital arenas and cultivating the multiple literacies required for students of composition to participate effectively in the many discursive arenas of their lives.

*YouTube as Web 2.0 Case Study*

This dissertation takes the popular video-sharing site, YouTube, as its primary case study, with the understanding that many of the practices taking place there can be applied to other Web 2.0 spaces, as well. Founded in 2005, YouTube has already demonstrated considerable cultural significance in a variety of spheres, with nearly half (48%) of all Internet users utilizing the site as of the end of 2007 (Rainie). The political power of the site became evident a year after the site was founded, when Virginia Senator George Allen’s campaign for a presidential nomination suffered tremendously when a Native American student uploaded video footage of Allen making racist remarks (“First YouTube Election”). More recently, the site had a remarkably significant presence during the 2008 presidential elections, with politicians courting YouTube audiences through a “YouChoose” section of the site, which spotlighted a political candidate a week and each candidate making a video especially for YouTube viewers; the site also partnered with
CNN to present the first-ever CNN-YouTube Debates, which was broadcast over both YouTube and CNN (I will discuss this event in more detail in Chapter 2).

Of equal interest is the way the site has shifted the relationship between advertisers and consumers. Several major networks initially poised to pursue lawsuits against YouTube for failing to prevent users from uploading copyrighted material have since chosen to take advantage of the site’s widespread popularity by developing their own presence on the site. While many copyright and intellectual property issues remain (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), YouTube’s ability to negotiate with and circumvent big media in many ways is still impressive for a site that saw so many funding woes in the beginning. Despite the allure of turning to unskippable ads that would have generated considerable revenue during the site’s infancy, for example, the site creators let their user base grow without the benefit of advertising dollars, in the hopes that a large, established pool of active users would then give them more ability to negotiate how ads could be integrated into the site in a non-obtrusive way. This decision to let user needs shape advertising exemplifies a core aspect of the Web 2.0 ethos: user needs drive site content and structure. Thus, even in its most early stages, YouTube and similar sites disrupted cultural norms by turning the tables on who was allowed to make the rules. For these and other reasons, YouTube provides an interesting and useful starting point for thinking about the complex connections between Web 2.0, democracy, and literacy. As public spheres, these environments provide space and opportunity for individuals to discuss social issues and, through that discussion, potentially influence political action.

The Public Sphere and Rhetorical Democracy

With YouTube and similar Web 2.0 spaces in mind, then, I first turn to relevant public sphere scholarship to ground my understanding of discursive spaces and their connection to
citizenship. The concept of the “public sphere”—commonly understood as a network for influencing political action through the communication of information and points of view—is most prominently known through the work of Jürgen Habermas. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas defines and discusses the rise and fall of the “bourgeois public sphere,” which he defines as being “the sphere of private people come together as a public” (27), in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Habermas’s framework, the public sphere emerged out of the private sphere (the family), as each individual’s “public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented…subjectivity of the conjugal family’s intimate domain” (28). The property-owning, male head-of-family grounded his political self-understanding in this sphere—it became “the training ground for a critical public reflection” (28). At the same time, Habermas also argues that the bourgeois public sphere emerged out of the “literary public sphere,” which provided a vehicle for generating public opinion as periodicals such as journals and newspapers became more popular and, as a result, provided more opportunities for rational-critical debate. Thus, literacy and dialogue become important aspects of Habermas’s framework, as he notes the self reflexivity and political mindset involved with composing, reading, and responding to public compositions: “The public that read and debated…read and debated about itself” (43).

Additionally, Habermas’s account foregrounds the important function that rational-critical debate (and the public opinion resulting from that process) played in terms of giving citizens a way to provide a check on institutions of established authority (52).

In short, Habermas conceives of the public sphere as being a space where private individuals come together and are able to participate as equals in the process of rational-critical debate on matters of collective importance. While there are many critiques of this idealized
model (see below), Habermas himself notes several factors that contributed to the downfall of the bourgeois public sphere—most notably, the rise of large private interests such as giant, profit-driven newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century. These entities blurred lines between corporate and public interests and ultimately “became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere” (185). The very media that had once been the central means for rational-critical debate (the lifeblood of the public sphere) were now institutions of manipulation and deception that ultimately contributed to the erosion of the bourgeois public sphere.

Although undoubtedly influential, Habermas' argument has been subject to many critiques. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser articulates several of the most prominent flaws of Habermas’s public sphere concept. Drawing from the work of scholars such as Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Eley, Fraser points out that the bourgeois public sphere championed by Habermas as a site of universal access and participation was in actuality constituted by “a number of significant exclusions,” including gender (113). Additionally, Fraser notes that, in idealizing the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas ignores other public spheres, such as those constructed by women “of various classes and ethnicities…even despite their exclusion from the official public sphere” (115). In doing so, Habermas also inevitably ignores the fact that participation in public life can take many forms other than rational-critical debate in “the” public sphere, and that there have always been “competing counterpublics” that most often were “constituted by conflict” (116). With these critiques in mind, it becomes clear that the bourgeois public sphere in its idealized form never existed in practice. Instead, Fraser argues, this public sphere existed only as “an unrealized utopian ideal” which “functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (116).
As a result, while Fraser acknowledges that Habermas provides an important contribution to democratic theory—one which allows us to make sense of the ways and spaces in which citizens discuss issues—she also notes that Habermas’s framework is in many ways deeply flawed.

In response to these critiques, scholars have attempted to extend or re-imagine this concept of the public sphere. In *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, Gerard Hauser offers a uniquely rhetorical take on the public sphere by “explor[ing] the discursive dimensions of publics, public spheres, and public opinions” (11), the result being a model of the public sphere that is truly discourse-based (as opposed to class-based) and is derived from actual discursive practices (rather than idealized ones). Rhetoric, then, is central to this concept of the public sphere, and, in contrast to the idealized public sphere posited by Habermas, Hauser suggests a “vernacular rhetorical model” that allows for partisan rhetoric and therefore does not attempt to conceal multiple publics. Instead of advocating the disinterested deliberation articulated by Habermas, Hauser argues for interested and partisan deliberation. Hauser imagines a web-like structure of interactions between multiple vernacular publics and suggests an alternative to Habermas’ emphasis on consensus, arguing that “[a] public’s emergence is not dependent on consensus but on the sharing of a common world, even when understood and lived differently by different segments of society” (69).

This attention to interested, partisan engagement and multiple, competing rhetorics is a key shift from a model that emphasizes consensus. Additionally, of particular interest to this dissertation is Hauser’s theory of “vernacular rhetorics,” which he loosely defines as “common expressions of those who participate in their conversational space” (67). These exchanges “both lack and transcend the force of official authority” by allowing unofficial, oftentimes marginalized individuals to form publics through conversations about common interests—an
important theoretical shift, since this model foregrounds the political functions of unconventional discursive practices. Hauser’s model also allows for a certain degree of fluidity and permeability of boundaries, which is an important shift from Habermas’s conceptualization of a single, monolithic public sphere organized around rigid class structures and tidy, disinterested deliberation. In this way, Hauser’s theory seems apt for rhetorical studies of democracy and the Internet, since the boundaries of both are constantly changing.

The Internet as Public Sphere

Surprisingly, Hauser does not discuss new media and Internet technologies, other than in a brief footnote in *Vernacular Voices* in which he acknowledges the Web’s “enormous potential to become a significant discursive arena within civil society,” but quickly adds that the “significant material limitation posed by the requirement of having access first to a computer and then to the internet” constitute major roadblocks to the Internet being fully realized as a public sphere (293, note 6). I see this as being a significant limitation to Hauser’s work, and my hope is that this dissertation can extend the conversation in this area. Hauser’s framework provides a useful starting point for attending to the rhetoricity of online communication and the vernacular rhetorics that take place in digital spaces. As this dissertation will show, bringing concepts of rhetorical democracy to study of Web 2.0 helps to shed light on the ways in which democracy is lived and experienced in the present. Therefore, this project contributes to conversations in contemporary democratic theory from a rhetorical perspective by highlighting the many ways and spaces in which public opinion is formed through rhetorical exchange, as well as to studies of the Internet and new media and the powerful ramifications these technologies hold for politics, literacy, community, and identity.
Fortunately, much ground has already been broken in this area, and studies of democracy and the Internet have perhaps never been timelier. While the use of the Internet to support political agendas is not a new practice, scholars have more recently begun to consider the extent to which online spaces may reinvigorate an agonistic, partisan, “vernacular” public sphere. Craig Calhoun has called for more research into the implications of new media technologies for the global public sphere (249), and others have begun to consider the extent to which the Web may foster rational-critical debate and decision-making. Barbara Warnick, Diana Carlin et al, Victor Pickard, Steffen Albrecht, and Richard Khan and Douglas Kellner are just some of the scholars who have researched the use of the Internet for activism and deliberation—political activities which have increased significantly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Khan and Kellner 88).

The majority of this scholarship focuses on sites articulating overt political agendas, such as Indymedia and MoveOn.org; however, some scholars, like Matthew Barton, are beginning to see the need for evaluating the political possibilities of more “neutral” sites of discursive practice. Social networking sites like YouTube, for example, typically do not assert a distinct political agenda or affiliation, but individuals may nevertheless use these sites for exchanging information and perspectives in an effort to influence public opinion and, by extension, provide an important “check” on the state and other systems of power. Like Calhoun, Barton recognizes the democratic spirit of open-source software and the potential for these technologies to enact a sense of agency in the minds of citizens. Further, Barton acknowledges the danger of corporate interests, which, as public sphere theorists such as Habermas and Hauser have noted, continues to be an important consideration when attempting to actualize a truly democratic space. Barton argues that “[t]he Internet is losing its democraticizing features and is becoming everyday more
like our newspapers and television, controlled from above by powerful multinational corporations, who demand passivity from an audience of total consumers” (177). Indeed, while Web 2.0 applications such as blogs continue to give users the power to publish their thoughts for a large audience with minimal financial resources and technological training, some arenas that initially embraced the Web 2.0 ethos—such as social networking sites—are installing more gatekeeping features that mimic the editorial and publishing control typical of traditional media.

The above sources provide an important starting point not only for conceptualizing the Internet as a democratic space, but also for keeping in mind the importance of avoiding overly romantic notions of the Internet as a public sphere. In a similar spirit, I recognize in this dissertation the Web as being a cultural, and highly culpable, artifact. While Web 2.0 applications may enact democratic principles in some ways, the popularity of these “democratized” technologies has given way to more commercial ventures which draw upon some Web 2.0 principles while also limiting user participation in certain ways. Not surprisingly, as these sites continue to grow, national media outlets, major corporations, and political figures seek ways to capitalize upon and control the public discourse within these highly networked Web spaces.

While the popularity of sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, and YouTube, for example, has forced media giants, large corporations, and politicians to dialogue with consumers in unprecedented ways, large, private, for-profit networks and corporations continue to scramble to set up shop within these spaces—calling to mind the capitalist takeover of mass media in the nineteenth century that Habermas saw as ultimately eroding the bourgeois public sphere. Facebook recently opened its profiles up to such organizations as ABC, Coca-Cola, Blockbuster, and Microsoft (Steinberg; Swartz and Acohido), and Disney purchased the children’s social
networking site, Club Penguin, for $350 million in August of 2007 (Marr and Sanders). It’s clear that we will continue to see corporate partnerships and applications in Web 2.0 arenas as these institutions and officials work to gain favor in the minds (and purses) of Internet users. In this way, Web 2.0 remains a contested space; therefore, as scholars like Warnick have noted, greater attention to the rhetorical elements of online discourse produced by everyday users is needed alongside the study of institutionalized discourse. This body of work is essential to mapping our understanding of the ways in which citizens navigate Web 2.0 technologies as democratic, agonistic arenas, and this dissertation project is another contribution to this ongoing effort. Additionally, attention to the discursive practices and tensions at work in these spaces may help rhetoricians theorize new models of discourse within digital environments. Such theorizing may help the field move toward the “vernacular rhetorical model” that Hauser envisions by providing a lens that may allow compositionists and democratic theorists alike to reconsider what counts as legitimate participation in the discourse of a digital public sphere.

Writing Technologies, Literacy, and Citizenship

Coming to these issues from a composition studies angle, I am interested in exploring the connection that digital composing practices—particularly those which are less formal and that transcend the “official” modes of public argumentation—have to political engagement in online arenas. As noted above, the concept of the public sphere places a key emphasis on the literacy of its members; participants must be able to read, write, and talk to each other about issues of shared concern. Research in U.S. composition history also reveals the powerful connections between literacy and citizenship, and many scholars of composition and new media have acknowledged the nineteenth century as being a particularly important historical moment for the development of literacy, technology, and citizenship practices that are still relevant today. As
Dennis Baron writes in “From Pencils to Pixels,” the computer “is simply the latest step in a long line of writing technologies” (17), and it continues to proceed through the same process of “accessibility, function, and authentication” that all literacy technologies go through as they become adopted by a society (16). Yet it is easy for the technology of writing itself to get lost in the many “value-laden notions” we attach to the writing process (16). While we may quickly acknowledge the computer as a technology that has dramatically impacted literacy and citizenship, the connection between these principles runs deeper and longer than might be immediately apparent. For this reason, I find it useful to turn to nineteenth century developments in literacy and citizenship as a starting point for understanding the ways in which these notions of writing, technology, and citizenship continue to mutually define one another.

According to Andrea Lunsford, the advent of material technologies during the nineteenth century, such as the telegram (1864), the typewriter (1868), the mechanical pencil (1822), fountain pens (1850), and the attached eraser (1858), as well as the greater availability and affordability of paper, altered the ways in which written discourse was produced (7). Thus, material technologies became deeply intertwined with the changing landscape of literacy, both in public and private spheres. Literacy was no longer reserved solely for the most affluent citizens, as a greater number of people could either afford some books, pens, and paper, or at the very least, could gain access to these materials through borrowing texts, sharing materials, or acquiring cast-offs.

With the growth of literacy acquisition (through formal training or through private study) came popular notions of a democratic promise of education. Theoretically, public education provided all U.S. citizens, regardless of class or station, the means for advancing one’s status in society. Education in the nineteenth century focused more exclusively on learning and
performing social codes than on matters of abstract philosophy, and proper literacy acquisition was an important—if not the most important—step in advancing one’s social station. Hugh Blair’s widely-circulated and frequently redacted *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, for example, was designed to give students a practical guide for using oral and written language as a means for advancing their upward mobility and social success (Ferrira-Buckley and Halloran xlii). This attitude is evident in other nineteenth-century instructional materials, as well, which, according to Carr, Carr & Schultz, held out to middle- to lower-middle-class students “the promise of social success, of rising to positions of power and financial benefit through industry, careful study of successful models, and watchful concealment of any gesture or thought that would give away personal position” (143). In other words, the educational discourse of the time promised students the ability to rise above their own station if they performed their literacy properly and adopted what we might today refer to as “standard English,” the dialect of power.

Some populations that had been previously excluded from certain kinds of discourse (e.g., women from public oratory) found socially-sanctioned ways to enter more public spheres of discourse through writing, albeit in limited capacities (Lunsford 8). Yet the institution of education—whether through reading at home or through formal training in public schools—was not ready to abandon notions of class, gender, race, and social station altogether, and many educational sites and materials served socializing functions. Nineteenth-century readers, for example, “delineated prescribed relationships to family, community, and nation…promoted moral habits, civic virtue, and industry; and…articulated the lines of class and status” (Carr, et al 85). Thus, while nineteenth-century educational institutions and instructional materials granted educational access to a more diverse population of learners, the privileged standard students aspired to reach was still an elitist one, and while these new students were given the tools and
permission to imitate the privileged standard, many of those students were only allowed to move so far outside of their prescribed class and status.

Yet the fact remained that the student body of the nineteenth century looked quite different from the student body of the previous one, and the very function of formal education was changing, as well. Perhaps because of the greater diversity of learners and their working-class career aspirations, educational curricula shifted from an emphasis on abstract drills and memorization toward a greater emphasis on the practical, in which pedagogies emphasized “knowledge and skills that would assist students in their lives and work” (Carr, et al 9). Part of this move toward practicality involved privileging the vernacular of English over the previously championed languages of Latin and Greek (though, as discussed earlier, the English that was privileged reflected the values and practices of the upper class). Universities charged themselves with preparing students to communicate effectively in the common language of English and adopted a distinct focus on preparing students for proficiency in written English (Brereton 27). Writing in 1879, Harvard professor Adams Sherman Hill insisted that educational institutions must adopt instruction in English if students were to reap the benefits of a “practical” education:

[i]f the movement in favor of those things which make for good English is to be of much practical utility, it must spread widely and penetrate deeply; every school-committee must insist that, whatever else is done or is left undone, a serious effort shall be made to teach boys and girls to use their native tongue correctly and intelligently…and must provide their students with ample opportunities for practice in writing and speaking the language they will have to use all their lives. (47).

Literacy in spoken and written English became privileged over an earlier curriculum that emphasized classics in Latin in Greek, the idea being that literacy was intimately connected to
citizenship and productive participation in society and that students should therefore learn to
effectively navigate the common language of power and prestige within that society (adopting
notions of a “standard” English, which speaks to our continued privileging of certain kinds of
writing and ways of speaking).

Meanwhile, as a corollary to this history, evolving writing and media technologies in the
nineteenth century also allowed those in power to control the public discourse in many ways.
Lev Manovich notes in *The Language of New Media* that the simultaneous development of
media and early computers (programmed machines) in the nineteenth century reflected the
evolving power structures of a mass society. Specifically, Manovich argues that “[t]he ability to
disseminate the same texts, images, and sounds to millions of citizens—thus assuring the same
ideological beliefs—was as essential as the ability to keep track of their birth records,
employment records, medical records, and police records” (22). Perhaps a darker side of the
literacy boom during this period, then, was the reality that literacy was cultivated in service of
regulating public dialogue and disseminating certain ideological beliefs that were not always in
the best interest of the citizens themselves. Literacy still remained important to the development
of citizenship, but the function of that literacy and the true nature of that citizenship remained
highly questionable.

*New Media, Digital Literacies, and Democracy*

Nevertheless, if we accept the notion that literacy is historically intertwined with
citizenship and participation in a democratic society, and if we accept the Internet as potentially
reviving the public sphere concept, then the question becomes: what types of literacies are
required for participation within digital public spheres, and what impact does “new media” have
on this evolving democracy? To begin, some basic background, definitions, and concepts of new
media may be useful. Cynthia Selfe defines new media as “texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media…and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues. These texts generally place a heavy emphasis on visual elements…and they often involve some level of interactivity” (“Students Who Teach” 43). Over the past two decades, the field of composition studies has gradually recognized new possibilities that hypertext, hypermedia, and, ultimately, new media might present for composing (Hawisher, et al 185; 236). In fact, the continued proliferation of these technologies has led scholars like Jay David Bolter, writing in 2001, to declare that we are currently in the “late age of print” (2).

Contrary to what some dystopian narratives might suggest, however, new media technologies do not constitute the loss of literacy; rather, the kinds of literacies needed to navigate online and offline discursive arenas are becoming more complex, particularly as our communication media continue to evolve. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin note in Remediation: Understanding New Media, the “newness” of new media “comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). Similarly, Lev Manovich argues in The Language of New Media that “new media” refers to “graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts that have become computable” (20). In other words, what is “new” about new media is the “shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication” (19). It is not so much that new media technologies have erased old ways of composing and performing literacy in relation to citizenship; rather, new media writing technologies have remediated literacy and democracy—they have refashioned those traditions, all the while embedding “old” literacies within the new (Bolter and Grusin 19). In Computers and Composition: The Cyborg Era, James Inman offers the term “cyborg literacy” to represent
these contemporary meaning-making practices, noting that such meaning-making “requires that symbols and signs must be understood as the building blocks of meaning” (159) and that printed, alphabetic texts, while still important, provide just one of many categories of meaning-making (160).

In response, many scholars have begun to map the changing landscape of literacy in a new media culture, as well as the political ramifications of those shifts. In *Literacy in the New Media Age*, for example, Gunther Kress discusses the shift from a book-oriented culture to a screen-oriented one, pointing out the implications of this shift on, among other things, democracy and power relationships. In fact, Kress predicts that these shifts will give way to major power struggles in the public sphere:

> The effects of the move to the screen as the major medium of communication will produce far-reaching shifts in relations of power, and not just in the sphere of communication. Where significant changes to distribution of power threaten, there will be fierce resistance by those who presently hold power, so that predictions about the democratic potentials and effects of the new information and communication technologies have to be seen in the light of inevitable struggles over power yet to come. (1).

Specifically, Kress predicts that print-based writing will remain the privileged mode of discourse among political and cultural elites even as the image continually displaces writing in many spheres of public communication (1). My interest in this dissertation project is to explore the tension in this space where institutional power and informal representation collide through new media technologies and evolving modes of discourse.
Locating Vernacular Rhetorics

In fact, a major goal of this dissertation is to identify some new (or remediated) modes of discursive practice which may constitute the “vernacular rhetoric” that Hauser envisions. This enterprise is both exciting and challenging, particularly since, as Kress’s discussion notes, new media is changing what counts as legitimate rhetorical practice in the first place, particularly as many authors delight in using new media to challenge the authority of more traditional media. In “@ Home among the .coms: Virtual Rhetoric in the Agora of the Web,” John B. Killoran argues that the “irreverent work” common to many online websites can be read as “a strategy both to create a speaking space in the crowded World Wide Web and to contest the monopoly of institutional voices in ‘serious’ public discourse” (127). Killoran begins by connecting Bakhtin’s conception of parody with Hodge and Kress’s discussion of modality, which Kress calls “a function of the relationship between the text’s producers and its receivers and, by extension, with the prevailing ‘system’” (129). Killoran goes on to argue that parody, in particular (which will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 2), is often used in virtual environments to challenge established media power and that the Internet offers virtual versions of classic rhetorical appeals: virtual ethos, virtual pathos, and virtual logos. Each of these virtual appeals, Killoran argues, gives online rhetors “the means to occupy positions made available by the new medium and simultaneously … contest their lack of authentic franchise in that medium” (131).

After discussing each rhetorical appeal in turn, Killoran emphasizes the value of imitation as a pedagogical method and argues that online parody may be used to bring students into public discourse: “Parody offers students a way to rub shoulders with, and to rub against, some of the loudest figures of their environments. Through parody, students may exercise the resources of their discursive environment to gain a franchise in the public forum, without implicitly
committing themselves to the ideology sustaining much of that forum” (141). Here, Killoran’s discussion provides a useful starting point for thinking about the ways in which irreverent ways of communicating (such as parody) common to digital environments provide powerful avenues of political participation to those who are often disenfranchised from public discourse on issues of collective importance.

Barbara Warnick also devotes some space in *Rhetoric Online* to the discussion of parody and its connection to cultural literacy. Specifically, Warnick uses the anti-consumerist spoof ads from Adbusters and the ever-changing Google logo as examples of how a parody’s effectiveness depends on the audience’s understanding of other texts. In this way, it seems that parody functions as an enthymeme: part of the argument is left unstated, with the understanding that audience members will be able to fill in the rest of the argument with knowledge gained from previous readings and experiences. The emerging recognition of new media parody as a mode of political discourse plays a fundamentally central part to this dissertation, particularly as these compositions not only serve compelling political functions in a vernacular public sphere, but also because the intertextuality of parody presents interesting possibilities for the cultivation of multiple literacies in the writing classroom.

Interestingly, despite the current lack of classroom practice in this area, history shows that this type of irreverent literacy is no stranger to the composition classroom. Early lectures in composition, such as the ones developed by Hugh Blair, point to the rhetorical, political, and civic value of comedy. In his lecture XLVII: Comedy—Greek and Roman—French—English Comedy, Blair discusses the social value of ridicule, arguing that it is “the chief instrument of comedy” and that satirical exploitations of human folly are “very moral and useful” (542). Referring to ancient Athenian plays, Blair identifies parody as a tool for political satire, while
also pointing out the importance of cultural literacy. Namely, Blair points out how these Athenian plays “are so full of political allegories and allusions, that it is impossible to understand them without a considerable knowledge of the history of those times” (546). In other words, in order to understand the parody, audience members must draw from their knowledge of previous cultural texts and rely on multiple intelligences to inform their understanding.

While irreverent performances such as parody continue to be used for dispatching political and social commentary (current examples include *The Onion*, “South Park,” and “The Daily Show,” to name a few), instruction in this rhetorical strategy appears to be absent from contemporary college composition curricula. Meanwhile, as Web 2.0 technologies continue to revolutionize the ways in which people access information and communicate with each other, parody and other irreverent strategies continue to emerge as a privileged mode of argumentation. Many political figures and cultural gatekeepers are quick to dismiss such irreverent compositions in an effort to preserve the norms of discourses of power. In this way, irreverent strategies may exemplify the spirit of Hauser's vernacular rhetoric by highlighting the tension between official, institutionalized forms of discourses and the commentary produced by every day citizens.

In addition to looking at the kinds of texts that are produced in Web 2.0 environments, I also consider the extent to which the very apparatus of authorship is being challenged and complicated by Web 2.0 technologies, and how these challenges may also constitute a form of vernacular rhetoric. As I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3, many new media texts highlight the intertextual nature of writing at the same time that they destabilize notions of originality and creativity, and contemporary digital rhetors are now faced with navigating the murky waters of authorship and intellectual property in what Lawrence Lessig, Johndan
Johnson-Eilola, Stuart Selber, and others have termed a “remix” culture, blurring the line between invented and borrowed texts (Johnson-Eilola and Selber 375). The highly interlinked nature of hypermedia, as well as the ability to easily appropriate and manipulate digital content, means that new media writing often “focuses on the manipulation of information and suggests connections to a new form of writing or a new way of conceiving of writing in response to the breakdown of textuality” (201).

Despite the fact that texts have only fairly recently come to be championed as linear, unified, permanent artifacts (Bolter 11), our culture—and perhaps especially the academy—seems reluctant to see these conceptions of linearity and unity become displaced. But like it or not, displaced they have become, and ironically, the academy has in some ways led the charge in producing that displacement. During the latter half of the 20th century, postmodern theory thoroughly assaulted conceptions of linear, permanent, unified texts, and before long, the rise of hypertext and hypermedia forced readers and writers to drastically reconsider existing conceptions of textuality as a stable artifact. Hypertext—recognized as “the structure of nodes connected by links” (Johnson-Eilola 218)—constituted a medium in which texts could “change for each reader and with each reading” (Bolter 11), rather than presenting a solitary, unified, unchangeable form. Thus, with the rapid proliferation of hypertext and new media, the notion of a solitary, linear, permanent text seemed to be a thing of the past. Further, hypertext, new media, and the resulting “remix culture” challenges us to, as Johnson-Eiola and Selber note, think “critically and productively about what it means to write, about what it means to read, and about what we value as texts in rhetoric in composition” (376).

At the same time that texts become increasingly unstable (if they ever were stable to begin with), the relationship between author and reader continues to change. Digital writing
technologies allow for more fluidity and less separation between readers and writers, who may readily shift between these two functions within a given hypertext. This is especially true with Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, where readers may easily edit and change the texts they read. Such technologies “reduce the distance between author and reader by turning the reader into an author herself” (Bolter 4). As a result, the categories of “author” and “reader” seem inadequate to describe the functions of composing and consuming within digital writing spaces, and scholars are now reconceptualizing these terms to suit new texts and composing strategies. In “Toward New Media Texts,” for example, Cynthia Selfe offers some new terms to help navigate the changing relationship between author and reader. Specifically, Selfe uses the term “composer/designer” in the place of “author” to describe “an individual who produces or creates a visual text” and the term “reader/viewer” in place of the traditional conception of “reader” to describe an individual who consumes those visual texts (69). While these terms may themselves be limiting, they nonetheless reflect the changing reality of hypertext and new media. In an age of new media, reading and writing a “text” involves more than arranging and deciphering alphabetic characters; rather, writers and readers must interpret still and moving images, color, sound, and other media.

This changing notion of authorship also carries deep political ramifications. As Kress argues,

Authorship is no longer rare. Of course the change to the power of the author brings with it a consequent lessening in the author’s or the text’s authority. The processes of selection which accompanied the bestowal of the role of author brought authority. When that selection is no longer there, authority is lost as well. The promise of greater democracy is
accompanied by a leveling of power; that which may have been desired by many may turn out to be worth less than it seemed when it was unavailable (6).

In other words, since Web 2.0 technologies remove many of the gatekeeping mechanisms required for most print-based modes of authorship, the usual power or authority bestowed upon the author seems to be changing. As scholars and citizens, we are forced to ask ourselves what the epistemic consequences are when anyone can publish and disseminate ideas, no matter how brilliant or misinformed.

Pedagogical Ramifications

The changing landscape of literacy and the resulting vernacular rhetorics within that landscape also force composition instructors to reevaluate instructional practices and the extent to which we should integrate Web 2.0 technologies and rhetorical strategies into the writing classroom. In “Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places,” Michele Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill note that, if composition instructors wish to equip their students for citizenship beyond the academy, then we should consider integrating the rhetorical practices of those working for community change into our composition classrooms (440-442). Composition strategies such as the ones discussed in the previous section—ones that mock authority and even dismantle traditional notions of authorship—may indeed constitute “transgressive acts of the least powerful” (442), or the vernacular rhetoric that Hauser envisions. Further, composition instructors “must also acknowledge that productive participation involves appropriation and re-appropriation of the familiar often in ways that accommodate audiences by speaking to shared values and working with discourse conventions” (381). Engaging students in the practice of composing these texts immerses them, to some extent, in an epideictic ritual of drawing from established conventions, value systems, and literacies to invent new knowledge (to
be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4). Yet as Johndan Johnson-Eilola notes, “We tend, despite all of our sophisticated theorizing, to teach writing much as we have long taught it: the creative production of original words in linear streams that some reader receives and understands” (200). In response to this disconnect, some scholars in the field of composition have worked to illuminate the ways in which new media represent changing literacies we can foster in the writing classroom. This scholarship underscores the reality that integrating new media composing strategies and Web 2.0 technologies into the composition classroom involves far more than simply teaching students how to operate the technologies themselves.

Stuart Selber provides one entrypoint into this discussion in his book *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Selber argues that writing teachers should emphasize three kinds of computer literacies—functional, rhetorical, and critical. Functional literacy focuses on using the computer as a tool (i.e. student as operator), whereas critical literacy asks students to consider “the politics of computers” (75) in order to be more informed questioners of technology. Finally, according to Selber, rhetorical literacy draws from the parameters of persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and social action (139) to encourage students to be reflective producers of technology (135). These sentiments are echoed by other scholars, as well. In “The Language of Web Texts,” Sibylle Gruber notes that, while a phenomenal percentage of teens use Internet technologies for communication and other purposes, few of these teens are able to adopt “a critical approach to the sites they visit, the information they download, or the manipulation inherent in the use of text, graphics, and sound” (154). As a result, teachers must find ways to bring new media literacies into the writing classroom not only to keep our classes relevant (Selfe, “Students who Teach” 54), but also to help students to develop critical awareness of their Web literacy skills (Gruber 154). Similarly, in *Computers and Writing: The Cyborg Era*, James Inman repeatedly
emphasizes the importance of composition instructors adopting a pedagogy that “draws on individuals, technologies, and their shared contexts all at once to promote equity and diversity” (212) as we work to advance students’ literacy in print and digital media and, through this critical pedagogy, link student empowerment to radical democracy (213).

Cynthia Selfe extends this pedagogical discussion to specific examples of literacy with her focus on the importance of developing visual literacy. Visual literacy, according to Selfe, involves not only “the ability to read, understand, value, and learn from visual materials…especially as these are combined to create a text,” but also “the ability to create, combine, and use visual elements…and messages for the purposes of communicating” (“Toward New Media” 69). In other words, as with print literacies, visual literacy involves being able to both consume and produce. While students may consume visual arguments every day through the Internet, television, billboards, posters, etc., they often lack the critical awareness to recognize the rhetorical nature of the visual elements they encounter on the Web or elsewhere. The composition classroom becomes an ideal site for equipping students with the critical skills necessary to identify the rhetorical properties of visuals, as composition instructors are uniquely qualified to show students how, as Mary Hocks notes in “Teaching and Learning Visual Rhetoric,” visual rhetoric retains the traditional rhetorical interests of rhetor, audience, and context (204). Additionally, as Selfe argues, new media literacy must be cultivated alongside alphabetic literacy in order for both teachers and students to “pay more serious attention to the ways in which students are now ordering and making sense of the world through the production and consumption of visual images” as well as to “extend the usefulness of composition studies in a changing world” (“Toward New Media” 72). With this exigency in mind, this dissertation also considers the extent to which the vernacular rhetorics of Web 2.0 might be brought productively
into the writing classroom and the extent to which the vernacular composing strategies discussed in this dissertation might be pedagogically useful.

Of course, encouraging students to engage in the composing practices of new media and Web 2.0—particularly those which draw from existing texts—brings with it many ethical challenges. Teachers must learn to “balance cultural expectations of use with legal pressures of copyright in our classrooms” (McKee 119), and the “remix” emphasis of many vernacular ways of composing will necessitate instruction on the sometimes murky Fair Use Doctrine of U.S. Copyright Law. Unfortunately, this ethical responsibility to uphold intellectual property guidelines also may threaten students’ ability to critique the most dominant, institutionalized forms of discourse through the practice of appropriation and remix. As Danielle DeVoss and Suzanne Webb note, “If we teach students to ask for permission to fairly use media work in their educational endeavors, we risk pushing them into a wall—a wall that they likely will not be able to climb and conquer within the 15-week semesters in which we typically teach. It is phenomenally difficult—and deliberately so—to find out who actually holds the copyright to a work” (95). I see this dilemma as highlighting once again the vernacular potential of Web 2.0 composing strategies, and in the spirit of this discussion, I keep an eye toward activist pedagogy in this dissertation (discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 5). While such a perspective undoubtedly may illuminate conflict inside and outside of the classroom, as Inman notes in his discussion of “cyborg responsibility,” composition instructors and researchers have a responsibility to recognize these sites of conflict. Responsibility in this sense is “about creating conflict amid consensus and pushing issues beyond their scope. It promises to open spaces for diversity and inclusiveness, even and perhaps especially when such opening is not easy, and it relies on individuals willing to make professional and personal sacrifices for the betterment of
the future” (277). Thus, while I recognize the various pedagogical dilemmas that this dissertation may present for composition instructors, I approach these challenges as a scholarly and pedagogical responsibility for advancing student literacy in service of a more invigorated democracy, inside and outside of the academy, and in both online and offline arenas.

Project Goals and Research Questions

My overarching goal for this dissertation is to illuminate and analyze some “vernacular rhetorics” of Web 2.0. The main questions guiding my research are as follows:

- **To what extent have Web 2.0 technologies remediated what “counts” as political participation and who is qualified to practice it?** What sorts of power relationships and access issues remain? How are these discursive arenas and the rhetorical practices associated with those arenas culturally and politically situated?

- **To what extent can Web 2.0 be conceptualized as a public sphere?** What are the benefits and limitations of such a conception? How might a “vernacular rhetorical model” help to better conceptualize and illuminate the actual rhetorical practices taking place in these digital arenas?

- **What are the privileged modes of discourse in the discursive arenas of Web 2.0?** What are/is the conventions, purposes, and rhetorical/political impact of these modes? How do these modes challenge, complicate, extend, remediate, or reinforce more traditional rhetorical modes?

- **What composing strategies and literacies are necessary for successful participation in Web 2.0 arenas?** How do these composing strategies challenge, complicate, extend, remediate, or reinforce prevailing notions of rhetor/audience, or authorship/readership?
What role do these literacies play in expressions of online citizenship and political engagement?

• *What implications do the discursive practices of Web 2.0 have for the composition classroom?* Which Web 2.0 composing practices and literacies should composition instructors cultivate? Of which composing practices and literacies should we be cautious?

How can Web 2.0 technologies and the Web 2.0 ethos be effectively integrated into the composition classroom?

To provide an appropriately narrow scope for the dissertation project, I focus my attention on one vibrant Web 2.0 arena—YouTube—and provide three examples of digital composing practices common to this space. These composing practices each provide a promising gateway into answering the above questions and illustrate significant manifestations of vernacular rhetoric in Web 2.0 arenas.

In Chapter Two, I focus on “irreverence” as a pervasive rhetorical trope in Web 2.0 arenas, with particular attention to how these irreverent strategies in new media formats facilitate dialogue and political action in ways that transcend the more traditional notions of public argumentation and political engagement. I define “irreverent” compositions as texts that ignore or mock the authority or character of a person, event, or text, with the effect of offering commentary on those entities. Irreverent compositions may employ acts of imitation, such as parody or satire; additionally, these compositions may modify or stray from the standard conventions of a genre (be it a literary genre or the “genre” of an event or arena) in service of a rhetorical purpose. These strategies work as rhetorical tropes—commonly understood as being artful deviations from the norm—by disrupting audience expectations and institutionalized conventions in order to make a larger political statement. For this portion of my dissertation, I
examine the CNN-YouTube Debates, held July 23 and November 28 of 2007, as a way of explicating these ideas. The tensions surrounding this event, between YouTube users and institutional gatekeepers, highlight the contested nature of social networking spaces, as well as the importance of providing legitimate space for “ordinary,” “common,” or, to borrow Hauser's term again, “vernacular” rhetoric in order to preserve the democratic principles of Web 2.0. The discourse surrounding the debates highlights Web 2.0's lingering potential as a complex site of engaged, partisan, vernacular rhetorics from citizens, particularly as users employed irreverence for rhetorical effect. Many event skeptics were quick to dismiss the irreverence of some user questions and commentary, despite the fact that such strategies work as compelling modes of critique in public arenas. In short, the response to the use of irreverent compositions highlights an important tension between the “vernacular” and “official” voices of politics.

In Chapter Three, I focus on “remix” as a composition strategy facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, with particular attention to how approaches to remix challenge the constructs of authorship and textuality the power relationships inherent in those constructs. After offering a historical account of authorship as a rhetorical construct, this chapter considers the political functions of authorship and publication before examining collection, Detournement, and mash-up as three approaches to remix. This discussion builds from the previous chapter, as many of the irreverent composition strategies employed in the CNN-YouTube debates relied on remix and genre appropriation strategies.

In Chapter Four, I consider the extent to which sites like YouTube remediate traditional rhetorical modes by focusing on the genre of epideictic rhetoric, most commonly known as the rhetoric of praise and blame, and the extent to which this remediated epideictic constitutes vernacular rhetoric. After providing a historical account of the epideictic tradition (including
expanding definitions of the genre that point to its community-building and civic potential), I discuss the role of new media in shaping contemporary epideictic rhetoric and argue that the spectacle of video in particular make YouTube an ideal venue for the practice of this genre. After outlining several shared features between the rhetorical practices of YouTube and that of epideictic rhetoric, I turn to specific examples to support my argument that the emphasis on bringing private truths to public dialogue, as well as the formation of communities, makes YouTube’s epideictic another form of vernacular rhetoric present on the site.

Finally, in light of what these examples reveal in terms of rhetorical practice and democracy in Web 2.0 arenas, I conclude this dissertation by considering the import of Web 2.0 composing strategies to rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy. After arguing that YouTube is just one of many Web 2.0 tools available for citizen rhetorics, I consider what these tools and their vernacular rhetorics might mean for the future of composition instruction and the extent to which these strategies should be embraced in the composition classroom.

*Methodology*

Digital research presents many challenges, particularly as it is a text that is constantly in flux and changing. Additionally, the political scope of my project necessitates my being constantly aware of the dual nature of my subject, since Web 2.0 functions as both a discursive space and a textual artifact. Many players and stakeholders are involved in the creation and maintenance of Web 2.0 technologies, though those stakeholders and the political implications of their involvement with these technologies might not always be readily apparent. Thus, this project requires frameworks that allow for the navigations of the messy, complex, politically-laden environment of Web 2.0 and the texts that emerge from those environments (and vice versa, since these texts to some extent construct the space to begin with). Since my focus is on
foregrounding vernacular rhetorics, I plan to adopt Hauser’s “empirical attitude,” a framework that privileges the “actual social practices of discourse” (275) as opposed to the more traditional, institutionally-sanctioned ways of participating in political arenas. This scholarly attitude is vital to approaching my choice of examples and my analysis of those examples, as it insists that I look at actual discursive practices, rather than “ideal” ones. Additionally, to help ground my case studies and textual analyses, I use articulation theory as a method of analysis. Developed by Stuart Hall (drawing from the work of Antonio Gramsci and others), articulation theory is a cultural studies framework that emphasizes the importance of context to discursive and cultural connections and how such connections are constantly being made and unmade. Specifically, Hall argues that articulation is

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’. The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (141-142).

For scholars in computers and composition studies, articulation theory provides, as Amy Kimme Hea argues, a way for researchers to connect a variety of cultural practices and discourses while
situating the Web “as a cultural manifestation” itself (274). Scholars such as Johndan Johnson-Eilola (in his article “The Database and the Essay,” as well as his more recent book, Datacloud) use this theory and method to make sense of the fragmented nature of the Internet. Since articulation theory insists that “[w]e agree on meaningfulness in moments of arbitrary closure” (Johnson-Eilola, Datacloud, 26) this framework may be particularly suited for foregrounding and analyzing the digital public sphere, particularly ways in which individuals form discursive linkages around matters of collective importance, and the new ways in which these linkages may constitute written “texts.”

Ultimately, my hope is that this dissertation will illuminate a few of the many vernacular rhetorical practices taking place on the Web and how those composing strategies hold deep ramifications for rhetoric, literacy, democracy, and writing pedagogy.
CHAPTER II. DESTROYED WITH LAUGHTER: IRREVERENT COMPOSITIONS AND
THE POLITICS OF NEW MEDIA PARODY

In the fall of 2008, digital studio 60Frames Entertainment released “Wassup 2008,” a 2-minute video parody of a popular Budweiser “wassup” commercial that originally aired in 2000. The original advertisement depicted several young men involved in a relaxed, lighthearted phone exchange that involved the characters exclaiming “wassup!!” to each other as they enjoyed a football game and, of course, some Budweiser beer. The 2008 version reunites the original cast (creator Charles Stone III and his friends) to show how the characters have fared eight years later, and the results are not good: One character appears to be in the process of losing his home; another is clearly injured and remarks that he has no money for pain medication; a third calls evidently from the front lines of the Iraq war; the fourth watches in horror as his stock portfolio plummets; and the final character joins the conversation amidst what appears to be a severe hurricane. Given these contexts—all of which refer to actual circumstances in the U.S. during the time in which the video was produced—the originally playful and lighthearted “wassup” exclamation takes on a woeful, pathetic quality. The video seems to take a hopeful turn at the end, however, as one of the characters watches presidential candidate Barack Obama campaigning on television, smiles, and says “Change. That’s wassup. Change.”

The “Wassup 2008” video is a powerful rhetorical piece on multiple levels. On one hand, the video is a form of self-mockery, poking fun at the pop culture phenomenon from nearly a decade earlier. Yet the video also uses a familiar exclamation from what had been (in theory, at least) a simpler time, when a group of friends could enjoy a carefree phone conversation over a football game and beer, to foreground the dire straits permeating life for many Americans during 2008. Furthermore, the opening segment (in which presidential hopeful John McCain can
be heard on the first character’s television saying that “the fundamentals of our economy are strong”) and the concluding message situate the video’s message within the context of a historical election. Given the rhetorical situation, the circumstances depicted are to be viewed not just as a series of unfortunate events, but as results of poor policy-making on the part of the Bush administration. In short, in order to level a critique at the Bush administration and offer an endorsement of Obama, the “Wassup 2008” video taps into a specific cultural moment by referencing a previous one, resulting in an argument that is layered with meaning that instantly resonates with many viewers familiar with the realities expressed in the video. In doing so, the “Wassup 2008” parody also illustrates the multifaceted function of parody as a genre—a genre which, as I will discuss below, engages the multiple intelligences and literacies of both creator and audience member, creating an enthymematic backdrop for a larger cultural critique at the same time that it serves a polemical function by attacking not only the text that came before it, but also larger cultural characters and contexts familiar to a present-day audience.

Perhaps as important as the content of the video is the way in which the “Wassup 2008” message is largely dependent on the power of new media for its effectiveness. The argument is not articulated with alphabetic characters, as it eschews the formal traditions of both written and spoken argumentation. Instead, the key vehicle for disseminating meaning in this case is the moving image, which gives a more immediate portrayal of the reality under scrutiny than a strictly alphabetic or strictly oral text would likely be able to provide. In a culture in which print continues to be displaced by the image (see Bezemer and Kress), videos such as the “Wassup 2008” parody reflect trends toward a more transparent interface; as scholars like Bolter and Grusin have noted, the interface of our media continue to become more transparent in an attempt to more accurately reflect reality (30). In other words, videos such as the “Wassup 2008” parody
allow viewers, through the video medium, to step into the version of reality being presented—the medium itself becomes nearly invisible as the viewer is pulled into this constructed reality.

Additionally, and of particular interest to this dissertation, the proliferation of social media and the privileging of user-generated content within Web 2.0 arenas allows a video such as the “Wassup 2008” parody to be produced and circulated in a way that it likely never would be in traditional media outlets, thereby engaging a wider audience for an alternative argument. Originally released on the YouTube site, the video has garnered, at the time of this writing, nearly 8 million views; and since the interactivity and capacity for embedding media in other Web 2.0 spheres is common practice, Internet users have multiple opportunities to view this “viral video” through e-mail, on blogs, and on other social-networking sites. The viral spirit of Web 2.0—that is, the snowballing popularity a piece of user-generated media garners through the proliferation of social networking and media sharing—is arguably what makes new media such as video in many ways the ideal format for composing important messages, and Web 2.0 platforms the ideal mechanisms for disseminating those messages. Further, since the technologies and literacies required for composing and distributing such messages are now more widely available than ever, it is not surprising that such compositions might constitute vernacular rhetoric—a means for those most often left out of traditional discursive platforms to have a shot at shifting, or at least questioning, the discourse circulated through more traditional media outlets. In other words, new media composing practices, Web 2.0 technologies, and the distribution options afforded by those technologies may contribute to the Web’s potential as “a multidimensional dialogizing space of vernacular conversations” (Hauser 69-70), which Hauser argues is key to a heteroglossic public sphere.
Part of the appeal of these technologies for vernacular dialogue is the relative accessibility and affordability of these technologies. The “Wassup 2008” video, for example, like most user-generated content, was produced with minimal funding and production resources typically required by traditional media. According to *Business Week* blogger Burt Helm, the video was put together in just nine days for less than $7,000, paid by Charles Stone III himself, who had never sold the rights to the original idea to Budweiser. Instead, as Stone told Helm, the beer giant paid him approximately $37,000 to lease the rights for five years. The video was then uploaded to YouTube through the 60frames channel, a website was made (http://www.wassup08.com/), and links were shared with as many friends and colleagues as possible. While the video was still produced with more resources and funding than the average person typically has at their disposal, the “Wassup 2008” video nevertheless demonstrates the greater accessibility of new media for disseminating powerful and important messages to a vast public audience and potentially challenging messages that dominate public discourse. And, almost as a final punctuation mark to a video that thumbs its nose at both politicians and media pundits, the video turns a message that had found its initial power through traditional media on its head by using alternative media to disseminate the altered message. This is a reality not lost on the video’s creator, as Stone noted in an interview: “That I’m able to use an idea distributed by a huge company, who made a lot of money off it, so that now when I put out what I want to say, it’s recognizable, and it sparks -- that’s worth $1 million to me” (qtd. in Helm). It is on this level, in particular, that user-generated videos within Web 2.0 spheres like YouTube may be most in the spirit of vernacular rhetoric.

To that end, this chapter will examine the politics of new media parody within Web 2.0, with an eye toward how such compositions might constitute vernacular rhetoric. I will begin by
exploring some definitions and sketching a general outline of how parody and genre appropriation have carried distinctly political functions, particularly for those wishing to bring critiques against the status quo, and how parody also has powerful connections to intertextuality and literacy. To bring a sharper rhetorical lens to this discussion, I will argue that such texts can be conceptualized under a larger, broader rhetorical trope of irreverence. I will then overview the social and historical contexts that may account for the prevalence of these irreverent texts in contemporary discourse; I will focus in particular here on the appeal of new media parody for disseminating important arguments against the status quo. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an examination of user-generated videos submitted to the CNN-YouTube debates, held July 23 and November 28 of 2007, respectively. Ultimately, this chapter will attempt to illuminate irreverent compositions such as new media parody as a particularly salient emerging genre that can also function as a powerful vernacular rhetoric, particularly in the highly networked, yet still hotly contested, terrain of Web 2.0.

The Rhetoricity of the Parody Genre

My interest in parody as a genre stems from a broader understanding of how genre functions ideologically within a given culture. Much scholarship exists on rhetorical genre studies, and generic study has taken many different forms across disciplines; yet scholars continue to struggle to define what “genre” and generic criticism is or should be. While the most reductive conception of genre focuses exclusively on the structural features of a particular form (such as a sonnet), more contemporary conceptions of genre take into consideration the inherent ideological properties of literary forms. In fact, many scholars have called for a more complex reconceptualization of genre, such as the one proposed by Amy J. Devitt in her book Writing Genres. Devitt proposes
that genre be seen not as a response to recurring situation but as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres. [...] Genre exists through people’s individual rhetorical actions at the nexus of the contexts of situation, culture, and genres. (31)

In other words, the generic features of a text cannot and should not be separated from its historical and ideological context. Instead, scholars should consider generic appropriation as being an inherently ideological enterprise and should consider what actions the generic appropriation serves to accomplish or support.

Communications scholar Joshua Gunn has recently extended this idea to suggest the present unfashionability of generic criticism may be due to reductive misunderstandings of genre: “Genres do not predetermine texts in a strong sense; they bind what is rhetorically possible in terms of precedent and memory” (6). Gunn argues that genre exists in social contexts—in “the collective, mental space of a community or audience”—and that the rhetorical act becomes a genre “once an audience identifies the repetition of an underlying social form” (6). If genre indeed exists within the minds of a community, and if the text serves as a formal recognition of an underlying societal structure, then attention to genre appropriation may shed light on the tensions between existing social structures and movements attempting to counter or revolutionize those structures. It’s clear, then, that a more thorough consideration of how and where genres are used may illuminate important clues to how social orders of the time are experienced and interpreted. It is in this space of tension that I approach my examination of the irreverent genre of parody.
As the “Wassup 2008” example discussed above illustrates, parody often functions as an ideal genre for disseminating ideas that in some way challenge the status quo. In Chapter One, I touched on some of the rhetorical scholars (past and present) who acknowledge the rhetorical function of parody; yet while communication and media scholars are slowly returning to humor and parodic texts as being legitimate forms of rhetorical practice (see, for example, Hariman, “Political Parody”; Achter, “Comedy in Unfunny Times”; Warner, “Political Culture Jamming”; Druick, “Dialogic Absurdity”), these practices still remain undertheorized and underdiscussed in the conversations of the field. Parody has been discussed much in terms of literary texts; much less time and space, however, has been devoted to the rhetorical nature of parody, though history shows clear links between rhetoric, literacy, parody, and politics.

Although very few comedic and parodic texts from ancient Greece have survived (Dentith 39), parodia is discussed in Aristotle’s poetics, and mock-heroic poetry was a popular form in which participants would compete for a prize (10). While there’s no clear evidence that the parodia ever really mocked (rather than simply imitating for comic effect), literary scholar Simon Dentith notes that the mocking/carnivalisque forms can be found in the Greek satyr plays (11). Thus, while it is important to caution against direct translations from the ancient Greek to our modern conception of the term, it nevertheless appears that the act of imitation to produce a comic effect was a valued art form for the ancient Greeks—an enterprise that may well be connected to their commitment to democracy. As Hariman notes, for example, the Athenians kept their civic life vibrant by infusing it with rich, diverse, heteroglossic public arts, and parody “left all the abuses of public life intact, but…exposed the limits of public speech” (253).

Later, the irreverent spirit of carnivals in late medieval and Early Modern Europe were rich sites for parodic texts—texts that were “mobilized to debunk official seriousness, and to
testify to the relativity of all languages, be they the dialects of authority or the jargons of guilds, castes or priesthods” (Dentith 22-23). In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the importance of the carnival to Medieval life, noting how this “feast of fools” gave virtually all citizens an opportunity to participate in a culture very different from the official one they experienced the rest of the year (5-6). The carnival was a place where “hierarchies were temporarily suspended and even inverted” (Druick 296), an oppositional culture that “critiqued institutional power by constituting what [Bakhtin] called ‘the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter’” (Achter 279). Parody in this arena contributes to the carnival’s “prevailing mood or spirit of fun mixed with social criticism, and its self-reflexive, playful discourse practices mark the enduring value of humor and laughter in the public arena” (Achter 280). In short, parody within the context of a carnivalesque arena constituted an important genre for infusing public dialogue with multiple, oftentimes competing voices. What’s more, the carnival in this sense represents a democratic arena, not only because it involves all of the people, but also because the laughter is, as Bakhtin notes numerous times, ambivalent (11-12). This ambivalent laughter—which is simultaneously lighthearted and polemical—both destroys and renews public discourse.

Despite this rich history, however, definitions of parody vary widely, are often very narrow, and frequently focus solely on imitation as the defining criterion, while ignoring the connection to intertextual dialogue and critique. Yet some scholars argue for a more inclusive definition of parody. Specifically, Dentith offers a definition of parody that is based on the intertextuality of writing, arguing that “[p]arody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9). This definition is more in line with my interest in vernacular rhetorics, which may include a variety of
practices and genres, including hybrid genres; yet adhering to this conception of parody, particularly in the interest of foregrounding vernacular rhetorics, may still be too limiting and reductive.

To broaden the boundaries of the genre while still utilizing an operational definition, I propose the term “irreverence” as a rhetorical trope, not as a stringent definition or category, but as a broad lens for identifying and making sense of texts such as the “Wassup 2008” video, which may use parodic and other strategies to engage subjects of public importance. For the purposes of this discussion, I define “irreverent” compositions as texts that ignore or mock the authority or character of a person, event, or text, with the effect of offering commentary on those entities. Irreverent compositions may employ acts of imitation, such as parody or satire; additionally, these compositions may modify or stray from the standard conventions of a genre (be it a literary genre or the “genre” of an event or arena) in service of a rhetorical purpose. These strategies work as rhetorical tropes—commonly understood as being artful deviations from the norm—by disrupting audience expectations and institutionalized conventions in order to make a larger political statement.

Irreverence and Articulation

From a cultural studies standpoint, examination of irreverent strategies works to make visible that which is represented as “transparent, inevitable, and wholly natural” (Makus 498). As a critical method, the concept of articulation provides a theoretical foundation for highlighting connections between practices, texts, cultural attitudes, and contexts that may on the surface seem to have no necessary connection (Makus 503). There is no necessary or immediately recognizable connection between Web 2.0 technologies and democracy, or between the construction of new media videos and the performance of citizenship, for example. But
articulation lets the critic illuminate links between these ideas within the complex network of cultural forces that shape and sustain ideology. Further, the texts and practices being discussed in this chapter also highlight the process of articulation. As my analysis will show, the act of parodying an existing text (or a broad genre) works to bring to the surface many of the presuppositions and “logics” of the original, most of which have been internalized so extensively that they seem to be common sense if they appear visible at all. Vernacular rhetorics such as irreverence use laughter to assault the “common sense of a culture” (Makus 500), an enterprise that works to shed light on the many values that are embedded within language.

Thus, I recognize articulation not only as a theoretical framework underscoring my examination, but also as an important function of the texts I am discussing. As Hall argues, communication involves the “construction, transformation, and struggle over meaning” which is always articulated against a particular historical backdrop and as part of a particular social order (“Ideology and Communication” 50). I approach my examination of irreverence with these issues in mind, taking into account not only the specific terms and phrases relevant to this discussion, but also the various social, political, and historical structures that shape the literacy practices being discussed and the extent to which access to the new discursive arenas of Web 2.0 are regulated by ideological forces and cultural gatekeepers.

Irreverence, Intertextuality, and Subversive Literacies

To begin, irreverent compositions such as parody are of interest from a rhetorical standpoint in part because these strategies entail an awareness, on the part of both composer and reader, of previous texts. As Bakhtin argues in his discussion of the novel, all texts are connected, as “one language can…see itself only in the light of another language” (Dialogic Imagination 12). In addition to the connections between the textual artifacts themselves, and
perhaps of more interest to this dissertation, is the cultural and rhetorical intertextuality that irreverence engages, as well. Irreverent compositions may reference not only preexisting textual artifacts, but also typically engage preexisting cultural norms, attitudes, practices, and contexts. In his examination of video parodies of campaign ads, Chuck Tryon refers to this quality as “critical intertextuality,” a practice in which “intertextual references are used to comment on or criticize the original text” (209). But I would add that the original “text” in this case need not be restricted to an artifact itself; instead, it may include the whole host of ideological attitudes and assumptions that are present in both the genre at hand and the cultural context that forms its rhetorical backdrop.

In order to work, then, irreverence requires a rather sophisticated amount of textual and cultural literacy. As Devitt notes, this understanding is built on the recognition that “others have responded to similar situations in the past in similar ways” (15). In other words, understanding and deploying genre involves now only knowing the conventions of the textual form, but knowing how to respond appropriately to a given situation (16). It is in this regard that irreverence becomes particularly interesting in terms of democracy, for, as Robert Hariman explains, “[p]arody creates and sustains public consciousness first and foremost by exposing the limitations of dominant discourses: it counters idealization, mythic enchantment, and other forms of hegemony” (253). In terms of vernacular rhetoric, then, an irreverent rhetorical strategy involves knowing when to act *inappropriately*—when to deviate from the expected conventions of the genre or context at hand. In his study of youth digital literacy practices, Jonathan Alexander points out that “literacy is an art of manipulation, encompassing both being able to recognize patterns of meaning in the onrush of information disseminated by multiple communications technologies and mix and match them, or re-mix and match them…in the
creation of meanings that will ‘challenge the status quo’” (90). It is in this context that literacy—particularly new media literacy—involves not only being able to recognize patterns (i.e., genres), but also being able to simultaneously disassemble, transgress, exaggerate, and exploit those patterns for rhetorical effect.

Since, as noted above, genre carries inherently ideological properties, the making and unmaking of genre afforded by new media technologies—as well as the malleable nature of many new media environments (to be discussed in more detail later)—enhance the subversive potential of irreverent new media texts in Web 2.0 arenas. For starters, technologies that allow users to manipulate existing texts helps to foreground the constructedness of public discourse and its genres. As Hariman notes, “[a]s discourses are transformed into images, chopped up, and moved across multiple media, their conventions become highlighted as conventions” (264), thereby facilitating powerful textual and cultural literacies within digital environments. And in addition to providing an important pedagogical function in terms of learning generic and cultural conventions, the development of these literacies also opens the door for counter discourses and other expressions of resistance to dominant ideologies. Alexander argues that digital literacies such as those demonstrated by the “Wassup 2008” video can function as resistance by way of “using the information bombarding us, much of it created by media conglomerates, in ways that query and question the beliefs we are invited to ‘buy into’” (90). Tryon’s analysis of campaign video parodies echoes this sentiment, noting that “parody can be used to challenge the authority of political powerbrokers, whether pundits or campaign workers, in shaping political discourse” (210).

It is in these ways that new media and Web 2.0 platforms together seem to be breathing new life into a genre historically intertwined with political critique. It may very well be that Web
2.0 arenas constitute the new carnival as championed by Bakhtin; in the noisy, crowded, irreverent arenas of Web 2.0, user-generated new media content is often used to level the discursive playing field, to cut “serious” discourse down to size and place it beside itself. As an irreverent composing strategy, parody within these spaces functions as “both a symptom and a weapon in the battle between popular cultural energies and the forces of authority which seek to control them” (Dentith 23). In this way, irreverent texts such as parody exemplify the spirit of vernacular rhetoric, not only in the sense that they constitute informal discourses emerging in response to matters of public importance, but also in the sense that these texts fundamentally underscore the rhetorical nature of publics, which exist not as static entities, but as discursive processes.

This dynamic quality of publics and public discourse suggests that there may be certain periods where vernacular rhetoric is more prevalent than others. In his discussion of parody, Dentith argues that there are certain historical moments wherein parody is most likely to emerge as an important discursive genre. He argues that “strongly stratified societies…where separate classes live in relative social isolation,…whose manners of speech and writing are very strongly marked by class” (30-31) are particularly likely contexts in which irreverent compositions such as parody might emerge. But the forms that parody takes during these periods, Dentith argues, will vary (31). This is another reason why the broad lens of “irreverence” may be helpful, as it does not restrict itself to the boundaries of traditional parody, but allows us to consider how irreverent texts “work at particular historical moments,” as well as the way those texts function within a given rhetorical situation (28). It is in this regard that I approach irreverence as a rhetorical trope—to examine how it functions as a vernacular rhetoric, as a powerful means for the average person to participate in the discourse of a society that presently carries a great
distrust of its citizens, of a society where citizens have lost trust in the media’s ability to disseminate information fairly and accurately, and a society that continues to be characterized by considerable political divisiveness.

Our Cultural Moment: Political Divisiveness and the Proliferation of New Media

Given the importance of context to the proliferation of irreverent texts, it makes sense to take stock of our current cultural moment, particularly in light of Dentith’s argument that certain historical moments are more likely to produce parodic texts. The 21st century has thus far been marked by divisive politics in the U.S. and abroad. In the U.S., an extremely unpopular war in Iraq continues to dominate news coverage, and the historical 2008 election highlighted many ongoing tensions between citizens and government officials. Distrust of government’s ability to serve the public interest continues, and young people (ages 18-25) in particular continue to feel disengaged and disconnected from discussions of public policy and participation in political processes such as voting (“How Young People”). As of 2009, when this dissertation is being written, the U.S. auto industry has all but collapsed in a struggling economy, and unemployment continues to soar at 9.5 percent (“Employment Situation”). At the same time, The 21st century continues to be a time of rapid technological proliferation, with over a billion people worldwide using the Internet (“Internet Usage”), and even more using mobile phones (Virki). The proliferation of these technologies has given way to many questions about the impact of globalization, and academic, business, and government institutions alike continue to scramble to figure out how to address resulting intellectual property and authorship concerns. Additionally, as Tryon notes, the 21st century is a time characterized by a widespread belief that “broadcast media is failing in its obligation to serve the public interest” (210), and many people therefore
turn to alternative media – including those afforded by Internet technologies—for their information-seeking purposes.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications and practices have revolutionized the relationship between those who create content and those who consume it, as the line between author and reader continues to blur. The greater availability of images on the web, as well as software that let users download and manipulate existing video clips, allow users to produce their own representations of reality in visually-oriented arenas. Given the challenges that these practices present for intellectual property and authorship (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), the Web remains hotly contested by those who want to preserve the democratic potential of these Internet technologies and those who wish to preserve traditional approaches to authorship, publication, and, ultimately, knowledge-production. In fact, as Alexander’s examination of youth “ravers” and “anti-ravers” websites suggests, the Web seems to be contested even among the populations who share in their marginalized status. According to Alexander, this fight over the “cultural territory” of the Web involves “the claiming of the new communications technologies as a sphere within which to craft and disseminate alternative views and values” (91). In short, our cultural moment is one of great political divisiveness, marked distrust of media, significant disparity between classes (including those who develop and profit from Internet technologies and those who consume those technologies), and considerable friction between gatekeepers and amateurs, all of whom feel they are most qualified to produce and disseminate knowledge in an increasingly globalized and flattened world.

Given these contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that irreverence is emerging as an important rhetorical trope for communicating ideas that highlight these and other tensions. Many “fake” media outlets, for instance, imitate the conventions and practices of mainstream media at
the same time that they critique those institutions. *The Onion*, a fake newspaper, is read by more than 3 million people each week (“Media Kit”). Fake news programs such as “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart” and “The Colbert Report” are similarly popular, with each episode garnering more than a million viewers (Gorman). As Hariman notes, these programs, along with the many parodic Web sites, altered photos and video clip spoofs, parodic campaign ads, and jokes that circulate through e-mail, blogs, and so on, all typically carry commentary—whether positive or negative—and in doing so constitute “essential resources for sustaining public culture” (248). Hariman continues by noting that these forms of discourse help to place “serious” discourse beside itself, and, in doing so, help members of the democratic public to “reclaim their capacity for independent thought and action” (249). It is in this same spirit that new media parody functions as vernacular rhetoric—and with the greater accessibility of technologies that allow more users across class, gender, racial, generational, geographical, and other barriers to mash-up and remix “official” texts comes greater opportunity for more individuals to place the serious, oftentimes marginalizing discourse next to itself for examination and critique. And while many nay-sayers lament the trend toward entertainment venues as sources of information, others are quick to remind us that “news” itself is a construct, the binary between information and entertainment is an uneasy one, and citizens need not necessarily perform their citizenship in rational and serious ways (Achter 277).

*Irreverent Composition and The CNN-YouTube Debates*

To illustrate the ways in which irreverence operates as an important rhetorical trope in a digital public sphere, I will now turn my examination to the CNN-YouTube debates, held July 23 and November 28 of 2007. The tensions surrounding this event—tensions between YouTube users and institutional gatekeepers—highlights the contested nature of social networking spaces,
as well as highlighting the importance of providing legitimate space for “ordinary,” “common,”
or, to borrow Hauser’s term again, “vernacular” rhetoric in order to preserve the democratic
principles of Web 2.0. The discourse surrounding the debates highlights Web 2.0's lingering
potential as a complex site of engaged, partisan, vernacular rhetorics from citizens, particularly
as users employed irreverence for rhetorical effect. As we shall see, many event skeptics were
quick to dismiss the irreverence of some user questions and commentary, despite (or perhaps
because of) the fact that such strategies work as compelling modes of critique in public arenas.
In short, the response to the use of irreverent compositions highlights an important tension
between the “vernacular” and “official” voices of politics.

While Web 2.0 applications such as blogs continue to give users the power to publish
their thoughts for a large audience with minimal financial resources and technological training,
some arenas of the Internet that initially embraced the Web 2.0 ethos—such as social networking
sites—are installing more gatekeeping features that mimic the editorial and publishing control
typical of traditional media. The CNN-YouTube Debates reflect this movement away from the
true democratization of a digital public sphere and instead mark significant attempts by political
stakeholders to install gatekeeping mechanisms that interfere with the democratizing features of
Web 2.0. As we shall also see, however, users may find irreverent approaches to “acceptable”
modes of participating to be a powerful way of expressing dissent and resistance to this
colonization.

In the past, politicians have been reluctant to take full advantage of the interactive
potential of web technologies, for fear of losing control of their campaign discourse. The goal of
this discourse, as scholars like Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Barbara Warnick have noted, is
simply to get the candidate elected, not necessarily to invigorate democracy. A true democracy
would require that citizens have input in the agenda-setting process (Stromer-Galley 128-129), but the current climate of strategic ambiguity leads candidates to avoid interacting with audiences that may compromise the candidate’s ability to stay on message. With this in mind, the simple fact that the CNN-YouTube Debates took place at all is noteworthy, as candidates were voluntarily giving up their control of the campaign discourse to some extent in order to show their willingness to dialogue with members of the public. In the first debate (held July 23, 2007), eight presidential hopefuls from the Democratic Party fielded video questions submitted by YouTube users (see figure 2), and more than 2.6 million viewers tuned in (Seelye). Despite some initial reluctance, Republican candidates agreed to participate in their own CNN-YouTube debate a few months later (November 28, 2007), generating even more public response and international publicity.

![Figure 2](http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-images/Arts/Arts_/gallery/2007/07/24/cnnyoutube460.jpg)
The weeks leading up to the first debate were filled with optimism about the event, with some predicting it would be the “most democratic presidential debate ever” (O'Brien). However, the degree to which users were actually setting the agenda of the event is highly questionnable.

In fact, a major theme emerging from the discourse surrounding the CNN-YouTube debates was one of distrust. Specifically, discussions leading up to, during, and following the debate illustrated the tension between pervasive distrust of the public opinion on one hand and rising distrust of big media corporations on the other. Much of this discussion centered on the editorial processes utilized to select roughly 40 questions from the several thousand submitted by YouTube users. Instead of airing the most viewed or most highly rated video questions (which would be more consistent with the values of Web 2.0), CNN officials sifted through thousands of video submissions and decided which ones would be presented to the candidates during the debate. On the eve of the Republican debate, CNN senior vice president David Bohrman justified his decision to leave selection processes in the hands of journalists by arguing that “the web is still too immature a medium to set an agenda for a national debate” (Stirland). He went on to express his distrust of popular opinion, a sentiment shared throughout blogs, discussion boards, and news articles: "If you would have taken the most-viewed questions [for the first debate], the top question would have been whether Arnold Schwarzenegger was a cyborg sent to save the planet Earth [note: see commentary in next section]. The second-most-viewed video question was: Will you convene a national meeting on UFOs?.” For an event that claimed to be a revolutionary moment for democracy, the agenda-setting was placed almost exclusively in the hands of CNN—a large, mainstream news source owned by Time Warner—which, as Habermas and others would surely note, is itself a threat to the Internet as a public sphere.
In fact, not only were YouTube users unable to decide which questions were used, but they were also refused a means for rating or offering feedback to questions at all, thereby cutting popular opinion out of the editorial process entirely. As Bohrman's above comment highlights, debate officials—like the candidates themselves—were set on maintaining the appearance of a democratic process by virtue of presenting the event in a different media format, while also taking steps to remove the very functions of the social networking space that empower individual users to participate in collective decisions on matters of public importance. CNN's assertions reflect a dominant ideology that tries to convince the public that ordinary people are unable to make informed editorial decisions, which may have come as a shock to the thousands of people who took the time to craft video questions for the candidates on issues of collective importance. This attitude toward citizens is consistent with observations made by Michelle Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill, who note that “citizen participants at a public meeting are often characterized (by government officials, industry representatives, and university researchers) as people who often know nothing and who rant emotionally about irrelevant issues” (422). Instead of claiming a privileged position within the process, citizen participants in the CNN-YouTube Debates were being used as mere gimmicks to sell the event.

Irreverent Composition as Resistance

Much of the skepticism about users' ability to set a serious agenda for the debate revolved around issues of rhetorical delivery, particularly since the key difference between this debate and other town hall debates was the central role of user-generated video content. At the beginning of the Democratic debate, CNN journalist and event moderator Anderson Cooper briefly reviewed some questions that were not selected, citing such justifications as “distracting” costumes and the use of children to ask adult questions. Although many of the most irreverent or “irrelevant”
questions were cut (such as the aforementioned “cyborg” question—see below), viewers and candidates were still treated to some songs, costumes, and seemingly flippant remarks on the part of question-askers. In fact, the unconventional strategies employed by some of the users is part of what caused many of the Republicans so much discomfort about taking part in the debate at all.

A surprise celebrity from the Democratic debate, for example, was Billiam the Snowman (see figure 3)—a snowman who, with a dubbed-over voice and animated carrot lips, posed a question about global warming (“A snowman’s biggest question”).

Figure 3: Screen Capture of Billiam the Snowman
(http://www.bloggersblog.com/pics/billiam.gif)

The rhetorical strategy of using a snowman as a mouthpiece for a serious question about global warming generated a great deal of attention for both the issue and the composers; however, this unconventional and irreverent approach to posing a serious question about environmental policies to presidential candidates was also scorned by many in positions of power and was
pointed to as justification for distrusting public opinion and participation. Both former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, for example, expressed skepticism about participating in a Republican YouTube debate, remarking that such irreverent displays as the snowman question upset the dignity and serious nature of a televised presidential debate (Distaso).

Indeed, many skeptics were quick to dismiss the irreverence of some user questions and commentary, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that such strategies often function as compelling modes of critique in public arenas. John Killoran argues that the “irreverent work” common to many online websites can be read as “a strategy both to create a speaking space in the crowded World Wide Web and to contest the monopoly of institutional voices in ‘serious' public discourse” (127). Consistent with Killoran's observations, many of the questions submitted for consideration in the CNN-YouTube debates used irreverence in the form of seemingly absurd, mocking questions in order to critique the debate question genre and/or offer a statement on ongoing national and international policy. One question depicted a masked “killer” who, identifying the candidates as “killers” themselves, asked them to share their “personal philosophy of killing” so that viewers could make informed voting decisions. Another question, created by a user who has a large following on YouTube (more than 14,000 subscribers at the time of this writing), and which was used by CNN as justification for installing gatekeeping mechanisms during the selection process, worked to mock the event in a different way. In this video, the questioner incorporates several key elements that make him look and sound like a 

1 Note: The "personal philosophy of killing" video can no longer be located on the YouTube site. Thus, I am unable to provide citation information for the originally published video.
“legitimate” political commentator; yet his ridiculous question serves as a deviation: “What are your thoughts on a poll suggesting that 88 percent of Californians elected governor Schwarzenegger in hopes that a cyborg of his nature could stop a future nuclear war?” (“The Wine Kone”). The clearly satirical question deviates significantly from the expectations set up by the other rhetorical choices enacted in the video (businesslike attire, music and graphics akin to those of a news program, the diction of a news anchor, etc.). In doing so, this self-proclaimed “trouble maker” mocks the process of the town hall debate itself—the rhetorical question is not meant to garner an actual response from the candidates, but to create a reaction in the minds of other users about the CNN-YouTube Debate format to begin with. The question may not have been appropriate for the “official” debate discourse, but it absolutely is consistent with the vernacular discourse of YouTube and Web 2.0 as a whole, thereby illuminating yet again the contested nature of this digital public sphere.

Not surprisingly, these and similar questions did not pass the cut to be aired on the televised debate, and it's likely that the composers of these questions knew quite well that the likelihood of having their compositions selected would be slim. While it is difficult to determine conclusively what motivated these users' turn toward irreverence, the effect is that these videos open up a new discursive space for users to participate within the parameters established by the event while also critiquing and challenging those parameters, as well as the candidates themselves. In other words, irreverence allows users to critique the political process and the politicians. As Killoran argues, parody (and, I would add, other irreverent strategies that mock people or events) is often used in virtual environments to challenge established media power, giving online rhetors “the means to occupy positions made available by the new medium and simultaneously…contest their lack of authentic franchise in that medium” (131). In other words,
users who submitted questions that were unlikely to be chosen because of their irreverent rhetorical strategies were offering a critique of the selection process and the institutionalization of the virtual space to begin with. By dismissing irreverent arguments from users, CNN and the candidates were essentially dismissing one of the most powerful modes of political critique in the online environments these officials wished to exploit. By attempting to silence the politics of irreverence, political and corporate institutions were furthering their efforts to maintain the status quo at the same time that they claimed to be doing the opposite—and irreverent videos that emerged in response to this dismissal (such as the ones discussed above) work to illuminate and resist this paradox.

I use the CNN-YouTube debates as an example of an event that typifies the ways in which the Internet has lingering potential as a public sphere, at the same time that its potential is threatened by capitalism and political institutions. For researchers, the event provides a somewhat tidy, more contained rhetorical space from which to evaluate the tensions between institutionalized discourse and the vernacular rhetorics of irreverence. However, it is important to note that these rhetorical strategies are not limited to formal events such as the CNN-YouTube debates, and resistive discourse on the Web is anything but tidy. What is clear, however, is that much of YouTube, other social networking sites, and the Web 2.0 ethos as a whole revolve around rituals of appropriation, parody, satire, and other irreverent modes of composing. Users often post their own versions of favorite videos as responses to the original, thereby engaging themselves (and other viewers) in a ritual of familiarity that promotes critical spectatorship and participation: “Such familiarity leads to anticipation, reflection and reaction on the part of the audience, wherein the principle of the audience as spectators of the discourse transcends to a principle of the audience as potential participants in the discourse” (McKenzie 196). “Mash-up”
compositions (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) that integrate recognizable footage from existing videos into new, “original” new media texts typically rely on the audience's understanding of the original footage in order to make a new statement. This kind of bricolage “incorporates practices and notions like borrowing, hybridity, mixture, and plagiarism. Most scholars in media and cultural studies invoke bricolage when describing the remixing, reconstructing, and reusing of separate artifacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings” (Deuze 70).

An example of this can be seen with the now infamous “Vote Different” (also known as “Hillary 1984”) video, which uses footage from the famous 1984 Apple advertisement that introduced Macintosh to the world (the Apple advertisement, of course, being itself a revision of a famous scene of the Orwell classic, “1984”). The Apple advertisement depicts an athletic woman, dressed in a Macintosh T-shirt and armed with a sledgehammer, running through a crowd of drone-like citizens whose collective attention is glued to a massive television screen. The screen features a bureaucratic “Big Brother” figure and is climactically destroyed when the athletic heroine heaves her sledgehammer into it. The original advertisement then closes with narrated text that says “On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984.’” The “Vote Different” video is virtually identical to the Apple advertisement, with two major changes: the “Big Brother” face is replaced with campaign advertisement footage of Hillary Clinton speaking, and the closing text now reads: “On Jan. 14, the Democratic primary will begin. And you’ll see why 2008 won’t be like ‘1984.’” The advertisement closes with the logo for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign (a logo that is also included on the sledgehammer-wielding woman’s shirt, in place of the Macintosh symbol while preserving the original “Apple” color scheme and shape).
While the initial “Vote Different” video modified an existing visual formula to make a political statement, the variations that were created in response served to shift the rhetoric from being about the political campaign to being about the construction of the video itself—the video's creator even offered commentary on how to go about constructing a “viral video” that would achieve the same kind of widespread appeal as the “Vote Different” mash-up. In this way, irreverent strategies such as parody in the “Vote Different” advertisement, as well as other mocking strategies employed by videos submitted to the CNN-YouTube Debates, give way not only to discussion about the implied arguments supplied by those texts, but also to discussion of the rhetorical strategies used to convey the irreverence of those arguments.

Limitations and Cautions

The irreverent texts discussed in this chapter—the “Wassup 2008” parody, select questions submitted to the CNN-YouTube Debates, and the “Hillary 1984” video – each represent compelling modes of political critique leveled by “ordinary” citizens and offer a discursive platform that is simply not available in other forms of media. Thus, the above discussion illustrates the power of irreverence as a rhetorical trope, including the power of parody as a genre. Yet it is important to note some critiques and limitations of these texts, particularly if our concern here is with vernacular rhetorics that use laughter and irreverence in with a polemical edge toward dominant public discourses. In general, the culturally conservative have shunned or dismissed parody in order to preserve the status quo, likely because of its subversive potential. Dentith notes, for example, that the culturally conservative, who have attempted to confine or dismiss parody as a minor form, often recognize the subversive power of parody and thus seek to deprecate it. However, Dentith also notes a “strong alternative tradition which stresses the culturally conservative character of parody—which claims that parody acts,
not to increase the relativisation of language, but to diminish it” (25). Achter also acknowledges this perspective, noting that much skepticism toward the viability of parody as a subversive genre can be attributed to the reality that “the copying or doubling of official discourse through parody in carnival can undermine or reinforce the first world of texts it takes up” (281). Just as news parodies such as *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* may reinforce “conventional ideas about what is important and newsworthy” (Achter 282), irreverent new media texts may reinforce and recirculate already prevalent ideological messages. Given that the ideologies embedded within language are already highly resistant to change (Makus 500), any adherence to an original may work to reinforce the very discourse it seeks to diminish.

Another limitation of new media in Web 2.0 as vernacular rhetoric involves the “viral” spirit mentioned earlier. Some of the most compelling critiques, leveled by those most marginalized by media and by traditional discursive institutions, may be the least circulated within the web of social networking and other Web 2.0 platforms. As Tryon notes, the reality is that videos “that reinforce existing narratives” may in fact receive more attention (213), thereby leaving little space for those truly vernacular texts.

**Conclusion**

While these limitations must be acknowledged and accounted for when considering the political function of irreverence, the above analysis nevertheless suggests that irreverent strategies such as parody constitute an important rhetorical trope that carries with it considerable political, epistemological, and rhetorical ramifications. Most importantly, irreverent texts emerge in opposition to dominant messages and may offer opportunities for those marginalized by institutionalized forms of political participation an opportunity to express their citizenship through new media literacy. As Hariman notes, “[w]hen the weight of authority is converted into
an image, resistance and other kinds of response become more available to more people” (254), and new media technologies help to facilitate the conversion of authoritative discourse into an image, both literally and figuratively. Further, if democracy as a communication system “is a set of procedures, practices, and norms for bringing discourses into contact with one another” (Hariman 259), then parody provides a crucial function for sustaining a well-functioning, vibrant public dialogue within this modern-day carnival.

In short, irreverent new media texts form a key part of Web 2.0’s oppositional culture. In the oftentimes carnivalesque environments of sites such as YouTube, citizens who find themselves disenfranchised from traditional discursive platforms or otherwise find those arenas lacking may use new media and the power of social networking to compose texts that seek not to reinforce the traditional rhetoric, but to place it beside itself. The effect may make viewers laugh in disbelief, groan with dismay, or gasp with shock; regardless of the reaction, the irreverent texts serve to “destroy with laughter” (Achter 282) the discourses of “official” public life. In doing so, we are reminded that a democracy is not always serious, its citizens not always rational, and its discourses never safe from public scrutiny. We are also reminded of the constructed nature of power relationships and the ways in which these power relationships impact the production of public discourse. The next chapter will continue this exploration by examining how the constructs of authorship and readership have been challenged by “remix culture” and how the authoring strategies afforded by digital media may constitute another form of vernacular rhetoric.
CHAPTER III. PIRATES AND PUBLICS: DIGITAL REMIX VIDEO AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORSHIP

In March of 2007, entertainment giant Viacom sued YouTube (and Google, YouTube’s parent company) for copyright infringement, seeking more than $1 billion in damages. The lawsuit specifically addressed the presence of 160,000 unauthorized clips of Viacom-copyrighted material, which had collectively garnered more than a billion views. Viacom complained that "YouTube appropriates the value of creative content on a massive scale for YouTube's benefit without payment or license" and that "YouTube's brazen disregard of the intellectual-property laws fundamentally threatens not just plaintiffs but the economic underpinnings of one of the most important sectors of the United States economy” (qtd. in Broache and Sandoval). The following year, in July of 2008, U.S. District Court judge Louis Stanton ruled that Viacom would have access to YouTube users’ viewing history and other personal data, including users’ IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. The ruling caused concerns not only for the privacy of individuals, but also for setting a precedent in which websites dependent on user-generated content are considered legally responsible for any illegal submissions made by their users. Such legislation could lead to a drastic change in business practices and may negatively impact sites like YouTube that depend almost exclusively on user submissions (Holahan). Later, political action committee Moveon.org and media company Brave New Films sued Viacom for ordering YouTube to take down a clip that parodied Comedy Central’s fake news program, The Colbert Report. The clip, “Stephen Colbert: Stop The Falsiness,” combined copyrighted footage from the television show with original material to construct a satirical presentation of a satirical text. The video was produced by Brave New Films, an organization known for using participatory
media like YouTube to fuel grass-roots activism efforts, and has at the time of this writing received nearly 300,000 views on the YouTube site alone.

Both the “Stop the Falsiness” video and the aforementioned Viacom/YouTube lawsuit (which is still ongoing at the time of this writing) highlight heated debates about the capacity for digital venues such as YouTube to serve as important sites for generating public dialogue and activism. Additionally, and of particular interest to the field of composition studies, these lawsuits underscore important tensions and transitions in terms of what we value about texts, authorship, and the very notion of “originality.” With many Web 2.0 technologies allowing users to “remix” existing material—that is, to appropriate and combine parts of existing works for artistic effect—and with sites like YouTube allowing for the mass proliferation of both licensed and unlicensed material, we are forced to reconsider our definitions of these and other terms.

Further, the Viacom lawsuit demonstrates the many values that are embedded in discussions of copyright, which highlight tensions between the average citizen and the powerful media conglomerates that control and disseminate many of the messages we are bombarded with on a daily basis. As the “Stop the Falsiness” lawsuit suggests, many of the strategies cited by mainstream media giants such as Viacom as being illegal are the same strategies those media entities use and profit from in their own programming. In other words, as notable “free culture” advocates like Lawrence Lessig have posited, those most harmed by stringent copyright laws are the amateur creators themselves, who we shall see are often rhetorically constructed as “pirates” in the debate about intellectual property and authorship. Thus, in terms of democracy, these lawsuits raise interesting questions about what increased policing mechanisms might mean for the free exchange of content within Web 2.0 and social networking venues like YouTube, particularly as the concern for power and monetary control interfere with some efforts to freely
distribute, talk about, and critique the institutions producing and circulating highly visible copyrighted material.

This chapter will further examine the import of this debate from a rhetorical perspective, with particular attention to how the challenges to intellectual property and authorship afforded by sites like YouTube may constitute another vernacular genre in online spaces. I will begin by sketching evolving conceptions of authorship and copyright, as well as the relationship of those constructs to democratic culture and expressions of citizenship. I will then show how the proliferation of digital media have further pushed the boundaries of what constitutes “originality” and how the scramble to control texts for profit within online arenas such as YouTube poses serious problems for the potential of these spaces to revitalize or sustain a democratic culture. To show how the challenges to traditional conceptions of authorship may constitute vernacular rhetoric, I will discuss the multifaceted and as of yet undertheorized remix video genre, with particular attention to examples that demonstrate strategies for using remix as an expression of vernacular rhetoric: compilation, detournement, and mash-up.

The Myth of the Solitary Author and the Unified Text

As fierce as contemporary discussions of authorship and intellectual property can be, it is easy to forget that these constructs are fairly recent inventions. In *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford trace the evolution of author construct, noting that in the Middle Ages, the modern concept of the “author” did not exist—and, because of this, neither did concepts of “plagiarism” or “literary property”; further, there was “no distinction made between the person who wrote a text and the person who copied it” (78). Jay David Bolter also describes how unrelated texts in the Middle Ages were often bound together, in contrast to our modern Western culture that demands printed books speak with a single voice and to a specific audience.
that is “economically viable or culturally important” (10). While the genealogy of our modern, autonomous, singular author concept is a complex one, Ede and Lunsford explain that many cite the work of Renaissance philosopher Rene Descartes as being a significant move toward our modern Western concept of individualism and, by extension, solitary authorship, since Descartes’ “separation between subject and object, knower and known, is intricately bound up in an epistemology that situates knowledge within the self, one that provides a necessary condition for the development of the concept of ‘originary authorship’ (79). Perhaps equally as important as these epistemological shifts were economic ones, as authorship slowly became a for-profit profession during the Renaissance (80), though even playwrights in Elizabethan England understood that once they sold their work, playhouses “felt free to make whatever alterations the actors wished” (81). Not until an Act of Queen Anne in 1710 did a true sense of legal ownership of intellectual property begin to emerge, marking the first of numerous copyright laws that developed over the course of about 200 years. Ede and Lunsford point out that the lengthiness of this process reflects the reality that “assumptions about the relationship between authors and texts that now seem self-evident, and even commonsensical, simply did not exist” (82). The eighteenth century marked a turning point for establishing a connection between the writer’s ideas and the actual text, as the “genius” of ideas was beginning to be located in the individual writer, rather than in God or in previous texts—an idea further solidified by the Romantics and Victorians (85-86).

From this evolution emerged what Linda Brodkey refers to as the “scene of writing,” or the commonly accepted mental image of writing as involving a “solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle” (396). This romantic portrait of the isolated writer is part of the larger conception of authorship as
necessitating a singular voice and a unified, static text—concepts that have since been thoroughly scrutinized and assaulted by postmodern theorists and scholars, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. In “Death of The Author,” for example, Roland Barthes argues that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (emphasis mine). In his view, no text is ever original; rather, it constitutes a “tissue of citations.” A year later, Michel Foucault published “What Is An Author?” wherein he argues that the “author-function” exists within the text itself. Both Barthes and Foucault see authorship as being inherently intertextual, fragmented, and shifting—yet the “writer-writes-alone” narrative of authorship identified by Brodkey still prevails in Western culture, and perhaps especially the academy. As Bolter notes, members of academia seem particularly reluctant to see these notions of unity become displaced, and our books and articles often reflect the imposed divisions between our academic disciplines and interests (10).

The persistence of this narrative has profound epistemological and political consequences. As Amit Ray and Erhardt Graeff note, “by falling back upon the concept of an idealized, corporeal, and totalizable author, we lose the ability to appreciate how texts function” (41). Further, Andrea Lunsford aptly points out the violent and marginalizing history of the “property” metaphor and suggests, through her referencing of Martha Woodmansee, that our culture’s obsession with authorship has powerful ties to capitalism that disenfranchises many people, including women (“Rhetoric, Feminism” 531). These critiques reveal ultimately that the author construct is deeply intertwined with notions of economic prosperity and social control, which may account for the passionate defense of intellectual property and authorship rights on the part of powerful cultural institutions and gatekeepers, who have the most to lose.
But even as these notions of solitary authorship prevail among the cultural elite, hypermedia have continued to problematize writing and reading, with ramifications for virtually all intellectual, literary, political, and economic spheres. Hypertext forces us to drastically reconsider notions of textuality, and, by extension, notions of literacy. In this medium, texts are often malleable and shifting, rather than static and permanent—textual unity and solitary voice are no longer required, or even desired. As a result, as Gunther Kress notes, the fragmented nature of digital media holds significant ramifications for the ways in which texts and authorship are constructed:

The ease with which texts can be brought into conjunction, and elements of texts reconstituted as new texts, changes the notion of authorship. If it was a myth to see the author as originator, it is now a myth that cannot any longer be sustained in this new environment. Writing is becoming ‘assembling according to designs’ in ways which are overt, and much more far-reaching, than they were previously. (6)

In other words, the “assembling according to designs” approach to writing which is so prevalent in hypertext environments illuminates the reality that texts and authors were socially constructed myths to begin with.

Thus, as hypertext began to emerge in the late 1980s, the field of composition studies was also recognizing new possibilities that these technologies might present for composing (Hawisher, et al 185). Since that time, the focus on hypertext has given way to theories of “new media.” Returning to the definition first presented in Chapter 1, new media constitute “texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media…and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues. These texts generally place a heavy emphasis on visual elements…and they often involve some level of interactivity” (Selfe, “Students Who
Teach” 43). Instead of producing a single, isolated, “original” work (as is typically the case with a print-based document), much hypertext and new media writing emerges from what Johnson-Eilola terms “symbolic-analytic work.” Similar to Kress’ notion of “assembling according to designs,” symbolic-analytic operates from a perspective that compositions emerge through the act of collection—they are “developed intertextually from bits and pieces already out there” (200).

The dramatic impact of these technologies on the very nature and function of textuality in people’s professional, educational, and personal lives left scholars in the 1990s with the task of reconceptualizing the term “literacy.” In 1996, the New London Group published “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” in the *Harvard Educational Review* and argued that language-only approaches to literacy were no longer sufficient if educators wanted to keep literacy pedagogy relevant to students’ lives beyond the classroom. Instead, successful participation in new media culture demanded what they called “multiliteracies,” or “modes of representation much broader than language alone.” The concept of multimodality, or “Multimodal Design” (New London Group), involved recognizing that meaning was generated through a variety of modes other than linguistic, including visual design and images, sound, body language, and space. New theories of writing thus acknowledged that the practices of writing and reading involved far more than transcribing or consuming alphabetic characters on a page, but included manipulations and interpretations of content across multiple modes, genres, and media.

Today, multimodal communication has become a way of life for many people in a variety of professional, educational, civic, and personal contexts. Web 2.0 applications afford individuals the opportunity to download, manipulate, and redistribute pieces of information that may involve alphabetic texts, music, video clips, and still images. What’s more, no text is “off
limits” in terms of accessibility, as digital technology makes available content from books, television, radio broadcasts, movies, magazine advertisements, and so on. As a result, these technologies make it fairly easy for a person with average technological ability and a good degree of multimodal literacy to appropriate content without permission—sometimes resulting in lawsuits such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These conflicts may rise in part from the fact that many of these appropriations result in work that is (as was discussed in the last chapter) irreverent and polemical to the original text(s).

Copyright and Fair Use in the Digital Age

These conflicts also reflect several embedded values about authorship and textuality in modern society. Central to the issue is a notion that somebody “owns” a given text in the first place; rather than rejecting the notion that ideas can be “owned,” the question becomes whether the text is indeed “owned” by the originator of the work (i.e., the solitary genius), or by the larger community of people who interact with or consume the work. Contemporary copyright law has evolved to privilege the rights of the author over the rights of the public, which is a significant change from previous models of copyright. Jessica Litman suggests that, as recent as twenty years ago, “[c]opyright was a bargain between the public and the author, whereby the public bribed the author to create new works in return for limited commercial control over the new expression the author brought to her works. The public’s payoff was that, beyond the borders of the authors’ defined exclusive rights, it was entitled to enjoy, consume, learn from, and reuse the works” (14). In contrast to our current culture of copyright that focuses on the bottom line, insisting on an economic incentive for the creation and distribution of texts, older models were “designed to be full of holes” (15, emphasis mine), presumably to keep the terms of the contract between the public and the author flexible. But contemporary copyright law is not just about
money; as Litman goes on to argue, the current debates about intellectual property are “less about incentives or compensation than [they are] about control” (16). As is the case with the Viacom suit cited above, the owners of copyright—most often large, profit-driven institutions—lead the charge in protecting what is rightfully theirs. This attitude marks a major philosophical shift from viewing creative works as part of public culture and copyright as an incentive to produce more works for the benefit and enjoyment of the larger community.

Complicating this debate about copyright is the mass proliferation of digital media, which has illuminated many limitations of traditional conceptions about what it means to be an author and what constitutes an original text. As digital media first became more widely available and afforded people the opportunity to share information (including copyrighted content, such as music files) with one another, lawmakers scrambled to craft legislation that would protect against digital acts of copyright infringement. One of the earliest pieces of legislation in response to the copyright infringement resulting from the proliferation of digital media was the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (DMCA). This act was designed to prevent consumers from intentionally circumventing the copyright protection measures of digital content. In other words, the act limited consumer’s ability to remix, copy, edit, or excerpt digital media—a provision that many activists saw as a violation of an individual’s rights to make non-commercial uses of legally purchased content. In response, Internet activist groups such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) work to protect users’ ability to share and remix content in creative ways. The term “Fair Use” is often cited in arguments defending individuals’ rights to use copyrighted works in creative ways. Put simply, Fair Use limits the exclusive rights of copyright holders by allowing individuals to reproduce copyrighted work under certain conditions, even without the permission of the copyright holder. Courts use four factors when considering fair use: the work’s
purpose (i.e., commercial or nonprofit), nature (creative or factual), amount of copyrighted material used in relation to the original work, and the potential market effect (i.e., if the new work is a substitute for the original). The EFF notes that U.S. courts typically recognize a socially valuable use of copyrighted material to be fair, such as criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, research, and parody (“EFF: Fair Use FAQ”). Thus, Fair Use provides an important check on the power of copyright and protects individual’s rights to create and build from copyrighted material in ways that are socially and culturally valuable.

In addition to efforts from groups such as the EFF to protect users’ legal rights to use digital content, other movements have emerged as part of what is often termed the “copyleft” movement, with the goal of encouraging more authors to share remixable content with the public for free. To combat what he calls a “permission culture,” or “a culture in which creators get to create only with the permission of the powerful, or of creators from the past” (Free Culture 9), Lawrence Lessig founded the Creative Commons (CC). This non-profit organization is devoted to increasing the body of works that creators can build from to create new content through the use of special CC copyright licenses. These special licenses allow authors to describe which copyright measures they reserve and which ones they waive. So, instead of the standard “All Rights Reserved” approach to copyright, content-creators are able to define licenses according to several conditions: 1) Attribution (the most accommodating, allowing others to remix and build upon the work, as long as the original author is credited; 2) Share Alike (allows others to remix and build upon the work, as long as the original author is credited and that the new creation be registered under the “Share Alike” license); 3) Non-Commercial (others may copy and distribute the work, but for non-commercial purposes only); and 4) No Derivative Works (others may copy and distribute the work verbatim only). These conditions are combined in various ways to create
specific license conditions (i.e., “Attribution Share Alike, Attribution Non-Commercial, Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives, etc.), and the license deed and legal code for each possible CC license are available for viewing on the CC website (http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses/). Thus, organizations such as the EFF and CC work to construct and sustain a digital culture wherein individuals are able to create and participate in a public sphere without fear of litigation from those who own and profit from the total control of copyrighted content.

Pirates and Policing

Non-profit organizations such as the EFF and CC represent important efforts to counter dominant discourses that circulate about those who appropriate existing works to make new content. Yet even with these organizations working on behalf of free culture and knowledge-sharing, litigation (and the threat of litigation) is still frequent, and a variety of content-policing mechanisms continue to be present on a variety of Web 2.0 spaces. In the case of the lawsuits described above and similar conflicts between copyright-holders and copyright-infringers, corporate institutions such as Viacom and Warner Music often rhetorically construct the copyright infringers as “pirates,” presumably to create a sinister image in the public consciousness and a more sympathetic image for those whose creative work is being “stolen.” John Shiga notes that the “rhetoric of piracy” has been adopted by copyright owners since the notorious Napster case in 2001, wherein prominent musicians such as Metallica sued the file-sharing service for not blocking users sharing “pirated” music files (Napster eventually lost this case and shut down its service before declaring bankruptcy). As Litman further explains, this term that was once reserved for those who produced large numbers of counterfeit copies for profit is now used “to describe any unlicensed activity—especially if the person engaging in it is a teenager” (21). Indeed, young people seem to be a favorite target for attacks on Fair Use,
perhaps because, as a class, teens typically have fewer resources for resisting these attacks. They are also perhaps more often associated with the technologies in question—these “digital natives” are therefore considered more culpable. This culture of copyright is waging war on, as Lawrence Lessig terms it, “[k]ids "stealing" stuff with a computer” (“In Defense of Piracy”), creating an environment that is hostile and discouraging to the creation of amateur content—content that is perhaps more likely to challenge the status quo. The groups most likely to present an oppositional rhetoric—in this case, young people—are constructed as being sinister, devious menaces out to “steal” the creative work produced by hard-working, honest artists, and who should therefore be punished accordingly.

The urgency behind this metaphor is perhaps part of the justification for sites that rely on user-generated material beginning to install automated filtering features designed to detect the presence of copyrighted material within a user-generated or user-uploaded work. YouTube, for example, employs a system it calls Content ID, which matches user-provided videos against the digital signatures of copyrighted work (provided by copyright owners). If a match is detected, users may receive an automatically-generated DMCA takedown notice and have their video disabled. Content owners may also elect to have advertisements embedded in the infringing video so that they may then profit from its presence on the site. Users who feel their video has been unfairly disabled or flagged may then work through an automated dispute form to make a case for their work (such as Fair Use), but even resolved disputes can take weeks to resolve. And, as the EFF notes, many content creators are unwilling to “wave a red flag” in front of large corporations such as Warner Music, particularly without the benefit of legal counsel (“YouTube’s January Fair Use Massacre”). Thus, even legal forms of remixing become casualties in the ongoing copyright debate as powerful corporations make compelling arguments
(through the threat of multimillion dollar lawsuits, for example) that sites like YouTube are responsible for protecting the pocketbooks of copyright holders from sinister “pirates” who dare to use digital content without permission from those who “own” most of our cultural content.

Politics, Digital Culture, and Mass Media

The oft-used pirate metaphor and the subsequent efforts to police and discipline sites that depend on user-generated content illuminates the power struggle inherent in the copyright debate. While the defenders of copyright would have us accept the pirate metaphor, the fact remains that the unauthorized practice of remixing copyrighted content carries with it a variety of rhetorical effects and social ramifications. Moreover, as mainstream media pundits became more aware of social media as a platform for public debate and discourse, the possibilities for a power shift among media venues also became foregrounded—no small change, particularly in the realm of generating public opinion. The agendas of for-profit institutions become eclipsed by the visibility of grassroots and non-profit movements who continue to use the power of social networking and Web 2.0 for activism and community organizing. Within this movement, video continues to emerge as an important medium; examples include the “Video Volunteers” project launched by YouTube in June of 2009 (http://www.youtube.com/videovolunteers), designed to link nonprofit organizations with the video creation services of interested volunteers.

The rising importance of user-generated video as a means for disseminating ideas and expressing citizenship has marked political ramifications. Hauser notes how U.S. political leaders have “relied almost exclusively on mass media for disseminating information and presenting persuasive appeals” in an effort to sculpt public opinion (26). But the movement from mainstream media to social media means that public officials have less control over which stories become news and, as a result, also have less control over the ways in which public
opinion is aggregated and mediated. Instead of relying on the power of messages produced by
the few who have access and control of mainstream media (Kress 17), technological advances in
the past twenty years mean that a wider population of individuals are able to craft and distribute
messages that impact the ways in which people think and act. What’s more, these new texts can
be highly oppositional in nature. Sites like Political Remix Video, for example, insist on creating
video remixes that “critique power structures, deconstruct social myths and challenge dominate
media messages through re-cutting and re-framing fragments of mainstream media and the
popular culture” (“About Political Remix Video”). Key to these videos is the idea that there is
power in recutting and reframing the images and sounds that we are bombarded with every day,
and that the process of recutting and reframing is what produces a new statement—be it a
statement of community identification, self-promotion, political critique, or otherwise. It is
within this tension that the remix video continues to emerge as an important genre for social
critique.

Given the above discussions of the politics of authorship and intellectual property, and
given the rising importance of video in virtually every sector of new media culture, I will now
focus on the emerging genre of the video remix as a form of vernacular rhetoric. “Remix” in the
broadest sense of the word refers to an alternate version of an original, composed through
additions, subtractions, or transformations of parts of the original text. The art form has its
strongest roots in music remixes stretching back to the 1960s (Williams), though some argue that
even the debate about textuality within the Phaedrus can be read as a precursor to remix culture
through its focus on “technologies of recording, recollection, and reproduction” (Gunkel 491).
The launch of YouTube in 2005, as well as the greater ability of video editing technologies such
as iMovie and Final Cut Pro, ushered in a new age of remix, wherein individuals were able to appropriate, recut, and reassemble the images they were bombarded with on a daily basis.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am particularly interested in videos that draw from copyrighted content, since those videos are at the most risk for lawsuits and simultaneously have the most potential to subvert existing hierarchies about who is allowed to construct and control cultural content. However, I also recognize that this becomes problematic for research, particularly since automated content-detectors and DMCA takedown notices make it difficult to find public videos that draw heavily from unauthorized copyrighted material. Keeping these obstacles in mind, I believe the following examples show the potential of video remix to function as an important genre for expressing citizenship and critiquing powerful social institutions. Given the rhetorical perspective of this dissertation, I will pay particular interest to the composing strategies used and the ways in which new arguments are developed from existing bits of information. I must stress that this list is not exhaustive, and there is inevitable overlap among the strategies discussed here.

Collection as Authorship: The “Gay Rights” PostSecret Slideshow

As noted earlier in this chapter, the act of collection afforded by digital media technologies—that is, the ability to pull together bits and pieces of texts that already exist and compile them into a new work—is one way that remix culture challenges traditional notions of authorship. While there seems to be a general consensus that editing a collection of articles for a book or journal constitutes a legitimate literary practice, academic and laypeople alike are much more uneasy about accepting digital compilations as legitimate acts of authorship and as new, “original” works. As Johnson-Eilola notes, both academics and the general public have drawn a line between the act of writing and the act of compilation (“Database and the Essay” 205). To
view collected pieces of information as texts—or, to view all texts as collected bits of information to begin with—challenges our notions of what “counts” as an original text and redraws some increasingly blurry textual boundaries. From this perspective, for example, entire websites like YouTube, comprised almost entirely of millions of pieces of user-generated data, could be viewed as a single text. Johndan-Eilola argues that blogs and databases do in fact constitute texts, in flux and changing as they may be. Such a proposition poses notable threat to the notion of solitary authorship and textual unity: if YouTube is a “text,” then is Google, the parent company of YouTube, the “author?” Are the individual users who upload video content the authors? These questions have no clear-cut answer as we work to remediate our existing theories and models of textuality and rhetorical practice.

But for the purposes of this dissertation, a more local example illuminates similar questions that arise through the process of collection as authorship. The video, titled simply “Gay Rights,” is a slideshow of images drawn from the PostSecret\(^2\) website, set to music. This video compiles postcards that express difficulties experienced by members of the gay community, in an effort to help viewers “see what homosexuals go through everyday.” While this video may not be as technically sophisticated as some other approaches to remix, it nevertheless represents an interesting example not only of how the remediation of print continues to impact composing practices, but also how the act of collection continues to be an important composing strategy within Web 2.0 environments.

---

\(^2\) PostSecret is a community project wherein anonymous participants mail postcards to an address specified on the PostSecret website. Postcards are then scanned and uploaded to the website and/or compiled in projects under the direction of creator Frank Warren.
Since digital media allows for the easy appropriation of existing content on the web, the creator of the “Gay Rights” video was able to perform as the editor of a collection by grouping existing texts around a theme and then redistributing those texts as a single work. The individual postcards are threaded together by occasional slides that provide a narrative function for the postcard images, much as an editor groups articles or other artifacts by a common topic or theme.

![Screen Capture of “Gay Rights” Slideshow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-6dlH8A)

**Figure 4:** Screen Capture of “Gay Rights” Slideshow (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-6dlH8A)

The first two slides set the narrative backdrop with the words, “You know something’s wrong when…” (first slide) “Your own family doesn’t support you” (second slide). These are followed by postcards such as one depicting a child in a doorway, with the handwritten words “staying in the closet still feels easier than breaking my mother’s heart…” Each of these narrative slides touches on a particular theme the author of the remix noticed in their own viewing of the PostSecret texts—themes such as religious intolerance, living in fear, the need to stay hidden, and the dehumanization of gay men and lesbians. The slideshow takes a hopeful turn toward the end, however. After a narrative slide that argues “It doesn’t have to be this
way,” the slideshow showcases postcards that somehow depict “waiting” for something, presumably more social equity for members of the gay community. After responding to this “waiting” with a narrative that inserts the author’s presence into the slideshow by stating “I’m waiting for people to be as accepting as their children are,” the video appeals directly to readers by asking, “‘What are you waiting for?’” and then asking viewers to take a stand and support gay rights, with a rainbow flag flying in the background.

The “Gay Rights” video presents some interesting questions about authorship and textuality. Given the fact that the “text” is comprised almost exclusively of PostSecret postcards, it may be tempting to attribute authorship of the video to the anonymous senders of those postcards. Or, as an alternative, authorship could be attributed to Frank Warren, who scans and compiles the postcards to the PostSecret website, books, and other projects. But since the video uses those documents to construct a new text, we might conclude that the person responsible for uploading the video (known on YouTube as Ethan8169) is the author, even though this seems to be incongruous to the notion of the solitary genius privileged by our current common-sense notions of authorship. Granted, this video has not been involved in any copyright disputes, likely because of the anonymous nature of the postcards and the transformative nature of the video itself. Nevertheless, the process of collecting pieces of digital content without expressly granted permission—in this case content that was originally print-based—allows an “ordinary” person to serve as an editor of a digital collection. In the process, Ethan8169 identifies significant themes within a larger discursive arena, assembles some relevant texts under those themes, and, ultimately, crafts an argument, almost exclusively with pre-existing material. The argument that is presented, and the form in which it is presented, defies the conventions of public persuasive discourse as well as argumentative genres. This is not a stump speech about gay rights carefully
crafted and recycled through sound bytes in mainstream media; nor is it an argument presented with a clear audience, purpose, and thesis. It is a vernacular expression of identification with a public issue—an effort at community-building, perhaps, and presented in a form that is accessible to a wide audience of viewers. Much as Hauser argues that public opinion is generated through “composite texts,” the “Gay Rights” video “supports inferences on the basis of language and arguments chosen by its multiple authors to address their own concerns” (264). Distributed in the digital vernacular public of YouTube, the video narrative lives in the space “between self interest and civic community” (264).

In fact, it is the context of this social media space that further bolsters this video as an example of vernacular rhetoric. According to their user profile, Ethan8169, who uploaded the “Gay Rights” video, would have been 19 years old when the video was created. Further, there is nothing in the user’s profile that suggests any sort of community sponsorship or company backing that might have aided in the creation or dissemination of this video. Thus, we can presume that an “ordinary” person (and a teenager, at that) was able to compose a video using fairly minimal digital authoring techniques to convey a message of personal and public importance to a fairly wide audience: At the time of this writing, the video has garnered more than 17,000 views and more than 600 comments on the YouTube site. While this may be an unreliable measure of the video’s actual impact in conversations about gay rights, the fact remains that Ethan8169 was able to compose and distribute an argument about a public issue, without access to a traditional publishing press, television station, or radio broadcast mechanism. The accessibility of social media allowed Ethan8169 a speaking space, however small, in a public sphere that has historically been plagued by gatekeepers.
Detournement as Oppositional Text: “So You Think You Can Be President?”

The “Gay Rights” video is an example of a text that relies almost exclusively on collection as its approach to remix. I will now turn my attention to another strategy common to remix video, *Detournement*, an artistic approach similar to parody that mimics parts of a well-known original in order to craft a different, often oppositional message. The concept of *Detournement* is often linked to Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, in which Debord critiques consumer culture and the pollution of ideas through capitalist media venues. Jennifer Sandlin and Jennifer Milam describe detourned texts as a “transitional space” (340) that “suspends time and space and thus allows us room to think of other ways of enacting particular moments. (342). The goal of this strategy is to “subvert spectacular (commodified) representations and practices” (Trier 274) and the passivity and social control that most people willingly accept within that spectacle.

To illustrate this remix strategy, I turn to the specific category of the “political remix video,” (PRV) which uses the composing practices afforded by digital media to cut up and reconstruct messages in order to express a political point of view (“political” referring not only to government officials, policies, and institutions, but also to identity politics and issues of social and cultural import). The recutting and reframing of images and sound is what produces the critique. One website devoted exclusively to this genre is Political Remix Video, a blog run by video remixers Jonathan McIntosh and Elisa Kreisinger. Characterizing the PRV genre as consisting of “guerilla works,” McIntosh and Kreisinger note that PRVs “use the appropriation of corporate intellectual property without the permission of the copyright holder,” and, since they often critique those sources, are often “particularly vulnerable to DMCA takedown notices.” Finally, they argue that PRV texts use dominant media forms (i.e., TV commercials, movie
trailers, music videos, etc.) to disseminate alternative messages, arguing that the familiar structure works as “a vehicle to deliver subversive political messages” and therefore makes the works “accessible to the general public, not just the art world or academics,” which they see as being a key aspect of this genre (“About Political Remix Video).

An example of the use of detournement as a video remix strategy can be seen with “So You Think You Can Be President?,” a video that combines footage from three televised news presidential debates and commentary from MSNBC with footage appropriated from episodes of the popular televised talent show, “So You Think You Can Dance?” With more than 34,000 views at the time of this writing on YouTube alone, the nearly 9-minute-long video presents a different kind of critique than the typical ad-hominem attacks produced during the election season, as it is as much a critique of mainstream new media as it is the candidate’s policies. In describing his conceptualization of the video, creator Jonathan McIntosh writes in a blog entry how his video offers “a glimpse of an alternate reality where media personalities are not afraid to honestly and critically confront the powerful” (McIntosh, “Notes on Remixing”). With the judges of the popular television show likely appearing more accessible and easier to identify with than the political candidates (or even the mainstream news moderators), viewers are able to envision an alternate reality wherein they are able to level critiques and dissatisfaction with powerful and oftentimes inaccessible public officials.

The video begins with fairly straightforward answers and with judges acknowledging Obama’s hopefulness as a candidate. It continues by attacking McCain’s support of off-shore drilling and nuclear energy by splicing in boos from the televised audience. As Obama agrees with McCain in his support of “clean coal” technology, the judges adamantly express their dismay and opposition to those policies. One judge remarks “I’m speechless. I feel like I’m
being punk’d right now,” while another one says “I feel like you’re wasting everybody’s time, and you’re standing there looking at me like I’m the crazy one!” As the video continues, footage of judges and audience members expressing their disapproval in the context of “So You Think You Can Dance” competition is used in juxtaposition to footage in which both presidential candidates acknowledge plans to increase military force in Afghanistan. Later in the video, when McCain says that the United States is a nation of peacekeepers, the audience members and judges alike laugh uncontrollably and suggest that McCain might unzip his skin and reveal an alien, presumably because his statement about the U.S. as peacekeepers is so obviously absurd. By inserting audience boos and harsh judge’s criticisms in juxtaposition to debate footage, the creator is able to foreground his distaste for the candidates’ responses to questions on specific issues—an audience response that is not typically invited by the televised debate genre. Additionally, it is notable that the critiques in this video are all leveled by women, which McIntosh explains was a deliberate acknowledgment of the absence of female voices in the presidential debates:

All three presidential debates were moderated by men and both the final party contenders were obviously male (as has been the case throughout the history of the American political system). With this in mind, I consciously re-created the judging process to make women’s voices deliver the sharpest, most insightful and humorous critiques of the candidates.

Thus, in use of detournement, the “So You Think You Can Be President?” video presents a multi-layered critique that transcends the typical election-season rhetoric of simply being “for” or “against” a particular candidate (rhetoric that is, incidentally, perpetuated by mainstream media); instead, the video encourages viewers to see some strikingly unflattering similarities
between the two candidates, while also reframing recognizable footage from two different sources to construct the “transitional space” described by Sandlin and Milam—a space wherein members of the public are able to address their political candidates critically and vocally and where women are agents in producing the critiques that are circulated so pervasively through mass media venues. In taking scissors to the recognizable rituals in televised popular culture and reassembling them to change the conversation, the video lets viewers “navigate problematic public contexts and issues…through the shared meaning and common understanding contained in and evoked by symbolic action” (Hauser 105). Unhappy with the “conversation” of politics being presented through the course of the election season, McIntosh uses the vernacular expression of remix video to create an alternate reality where the conversation unfolds differently—and in doing so, creates a reaction in the mind of viewers that carries real ramifications for generating new dialogue.

*Down the Rabbit Hole: “Mashing” and the Future of Authorship*

The strategies discussed so far—collection and Detournement—both draw from bits and pieces of pre-existing texts to create something new. The strategy of collection assembles pre-existing texts around a new theme or common idea in order to craft its message. The strategy of detournement involves mimicking and recycling highly recognizable cultural images in order to deliver a message in opposition to that culture by creating a “transitional space” where alternate realities are possible. The next strategy I will discuss—known simply as “mashing” or “mash-up”—also draws from pre-existing material. But unlike the previous two strategies, the rhetorical impact of mash-up comes from a significant blurring or erasure of the original text as it is absorbed into another. For this reason, mashing is perhaps one of the most compelling strategies, as well as the most difficult to talk about, since much of the terminology related to this strategy
remains nebulous. As Michael Serazio explains, “Mash-up” in its most basic form is the process of blending together material from two different songs to make a new track. But the term has evolved to include a template that involves combining *vastly different* tracks, “melting down the meaning of each and melding it together like a mad pop alchemist” (80). Further, the logic of mash-up suggests that the more disparate the pairing, the more appealing the final product (91).

A fair amount of scholarship exists about the impact of digital music mash-ups, and while very little has been written about video mash-ups to date, much of the same arguments made about audio mash-ups can be extended to the video medium. Specifically, I am arguing that video-mash-ups, like their audio-only predecessors, subvert and flatten arbitrary boundaries between genre and resist dominant culture through the act of unauthorized “plundering” (Shiga 95) of images and audio. In fact, video mash-ups may be more subversive than audio-only ones, given the dependency of dominant cultural institutions on visual media. Further, video mash-ups problematize notions of authorship by demonstrating “that the concept of authorship has always been a construct that has its own history, assumptions, and political interests” (Gunkel 500).

User-generated video mash-ups, such as the “Vote Different” mash-up discussed in the previous chapter, continue to emerge as a popular form of expression on sites like YouTube. Music videos are particularly popular and may take a variety of approaches that range in their complexity and rhetorical impact. One popular approach is to set footage from popular television shows or movies to songs from popular culture in order to level commentary about one or both of the texts used. One such video, “Kirk is a Womanizer,” sets footage from the original Star Trek series to the hit song “Womanizer” by Britney Spears. Footage from Captain James T. Kirk’s assorted romantic encounters are pieced together in time to the music, and the result is an
illumination of the sexism of the original Star Trek through the womanizing behaviors of Captain Kirk. The critical aspect of this video is provided by the lyrics, with such lines as

Must mistake me as a sucker

To think that I

Would be a victim not another

Say it, play it how you wanna

But no way I’m ever gonna fall for you, never you baby

Created by a 16-year-old girl, this remix video provides an opportunity for a young woman to deliberately isolate and critique sexism and misogyny in popular culture—and the publishing capabilities of YouTube allow her to share that critique publicly. Another video, “Life is Like an SUV,” mashes up a considerable amount of footage from broadcast news, television commercials, and televised sporting events. This footage is then set to a soundtrack comprised of selected sound bytes from those same entities to create a critique of a Western culture obsessed with power, money, and violence—symbolized in this case by the SUV.

But to problematize existing definitions of mash-up and further trouble our notions of textuality and authorship, I would like to focus on a slightly different example of “mashing.” This popular music video, titled simply “Alice,” utilizes a soundtrack that is comprised entirely of sound bytes from the animated Disney film “Alice in Wonderland.” The sound bytes are mixed to produce an electronic music track—a genre of music wholly distinct from the original film’s time period and overall artistic flavor. This new soundtrack then sets the audio backdrop for the music video, which is also composed entirely of images recut from the film. The characters from the film—from flowers, to the Mad Hatter, to Alice herself—all seem to be singing or dancing along in time to the newly created electronic dance track. The result is a
trance-like sensory experience that is both completely rooted in, and completely divorced from, the original “Alice in Wonderland” film. Unlike the previously discussed examples, “Alice” does not foreground an overtly political perspective—it does not level a critique against politicians, sexism, or consumer practices. Yet I argue that this video is still very much political and constitutes a form of vernacular rhetoric. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that video tears apart and stitches back together a text developed and owned by Disney, the largest and most recognizable entertainment corporation in the world. Disrupting the seemingly static nature of an iconic text produced by a media giant of such power and recognition constitutes a political endeavor in itself. But beyond that, the “Alice” remix functions as vernacular rhetoric by using the philosophy of mash-up to trouble imposed boundaries between genre and mode. In doing so, the video also troubles traditional conceptions of originality and textuality.

The video does not “mash-up” two distinct texts existing in isolation from each other; instead, the “mashing” occurs when “Alice in Wonderland” as a cultural artifact is folded on itself. Just as audio mash-ups “deconstruct (and mock) the arbitrarily divided cherished pop canon” (Serazio 83), “Alice” succeeds as “an exercise in irreverence” made possible by technology. Through the remixing efforts of the YouTube user known as “Fagotron” (who refers to himself as “Pogo”), the beloved Disney film is destabilized; and in creating a contemporary audio track and music video out of bits and pieces of the classic film, “Alice” also “blurs the high-low culture divide” (91) by addressing a wholly different audience of viewers and listeners. In using a video-driven text to first create an audio track, “Alice” succeeds in one of mash-up’s main goals of thumbing the proverbial nose at the imposed division between genres—in this case, between modes of representation. In short, “Alice” both deconstructs and fuses: As the original text is deconstructed, two distinctly new texts emerge—the audio track and
the recut video. These new texts are then reassembled to create a work that completely transcends our contemporary notions of what it means to be an “author.”

While visits to Australian user Pogo’s profiles on YouTube and MySpace suggest that this user self-identifies as a musical artist, the “Alice” video forces us to question the categorization of such textual practices. The multimodal processes involved with the production of “Alice” make it difficult to categorize Pogo’s creative efforts: is Pogo an “author”? A DJ? A video producer? An editor? None of the above? All of the above? Can “Alice” be considered “original” when Pogo did not “author,” in the traditional sense of the word, any part of it? These questions illuminate the vernacular nature of the piece. That is, the ability of this “ordinary” remix to trouble so many boundaries through the mashing process suggests the possibility of a collapse of genre itself, which would carry profound ramifications for the music industry. As Kembrew McLeod points out, the process of naming genres “acts as a gate keeping mechanism that generates a high amount of cultural capital” needed for participation within certain musical communities (60). Since the whole business of production and consumption in the music industry is dependent on the acceptance of genre, a text like “Alice” that presents so many questions about the nature of creativity and the perceived boundaries of mode, genre, and originality truly presents us with a sense of, to use an appropriate phrase from Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland,” going “down the rabbit-hole,” or into the unknown future of creative cultural production.

Remix as Resistant Cultural Production

While I have identified and discussed three common video remix strategies, it is important to note that there are many other approaches to remix—including machinima (the process of using video from online video games and other 3-D graphics engines to create
animation), \textit{slash} (a strategy adopted from slash fiction which involves recutting video to portray romantic or sexual tension between members of the same sex), and numerous faux movie trailers, commercials, and public service announcements that employ parodic and irreverent strategies discussed in the previous chapter. In the process of remixing, these videos effectively refashion and resist key aspects of our culture. The “Gay Rights” video identifies a common thread within a sea of anonymous texts and presents an assembled text as an argument to support gay rights. In the case of the “So You Think You Can Be President” video, detournement is used as a strategy to resist a culture of empty stump speeches, meaningless debates, and sexism. The “Kirk is a Womanizer” and “Life is Like an SUV” videos use the power of popular music and media images to bring a critique against other highly recognizable cultural icons and practices. And “Alice” deconstructs and reassembles a classic Disney film to construct a work wholly created from fragments of the original at the same time that it divorces itself entirely from the original work’s audience, purpose, and context.

Many of these videos are consistent with theories of “culture jamming,” a term that has come to refer to the process of taking raw material already existing in popular culture and refashioning it in order to resist certain aspects of that culture. Adbusters is a particularly well-known culture-jamming organization, a non-profit group notorious for its “subvertisements,” or parodic texts that mock popular advertisements. In the case of the videos described above, each video creator remixes cultural images, effectively shifting from consumer to creator and in doing so highlighting the democratic potential of remix culture, wherein the line between consumer and creator in the marketplace of ideas become increasingly blurred. In essence, remix becomes a mode of resistant cultural production on the part of common citizens interested in participating in public dialogue and creative synergy. From this perspective, the process of remixing and
redistributing content helps individuals to form publics through what Sandlin and Milam argue is an inherently community-building nature of culture jamming:

community is not the result of interaction, it is interaction itself. Community relationships are also sites of cultural production and reproduction…. the act of collaborative cultural production—creating culture together….and the act of sharing that culture with others helps culture jammers and their audiences move toward creating community. In this way, the public in critical public pedagogy, includes culture jammers themselves, those witnessing the jams directly, and those who may interact with media, texts, and artifacts indirectly thereafter. (337).

Within this community of culture jammers, then, the line between creator and consumer disappears. By appropriating, manipulating, and redistributing content (much of it copyrighted), individuals are able to form publics through their processes of creation and critical consumption.

Limitations

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, remix as a form of vernacular rhetoric and as a legitimate form of cultural production is threatened by increasingly strict copyright legislation that privileges narrow and highly politicized notions of singular authorship. An additional concern is the way that the video remix continues to be absorbed by dominant culture, thereby losing its oppositional status. AT&T, Coca-Cola, CBS, and the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition represent just a few examples of corporate institutions that have launched their own video remix contests, usually with a promise of money or computer equipment for the winning entry. Essentially, these moves represent efforts to absorb the potentially transgressive act of appropriation, manipulation, and redistribution to serve the agendas of the very organizations that remix video is most in a position to resist. In the music industry (from which remix draws its
roots), giant record labels have already succeeded in this endeavor: “The (once offended) co-opted are doing the co-opting as the mash-up has, in street terms, ’sold out’” (Serazio 87-88). In this way, remix as a vernacular rhetorical strategy threatens to go the way of punk music and other counter-culture movements that historically have been reappropriated and diffused by dominant culture. As Ted Strifhas and Kembrew McLeod note, the motivations behind corporate embrace of remix video become evident in its selective choice on when to invoke copyright law: “A vocalist who sings the name of a trademarked brand probably will not draw the wrath of an IP lawyer….but creating a satirical website that uses a company logo will greatly increase your chances of being sued” (131). With these concerns in mind, the future of video remix as a vernacular rhetoric will depend largely on content creators’ ability to remain critical and suspicious of corporate attempts to exploit the efforts of the very content creators they also have sought to silence through countless copyright battles and the threat of more to follow.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, remix remains a powerful and politically potent form of rhetorical practice. The spectacular quality of remix video, its inherent challenges to the power of the authorship construct, and its usefulness in community-formation through the process of creating and publicly sharing culture make this genre as rich in its complexity as it is dangerous in its (varying degrees of) illegality. With sites like YouTube allowing common people to employ the same strategies of appropriation and manipulation that were previously reserved for mainstream media giants and other cultural elites, this emerging genre has changed the rules about what it means to be an author, a reader, a text, or even a plundering pirate. Ultimately, remix culture reveals that “authorship” always necessarily involves imitating what came before. Digital remix video such as the examples discussed in this chapter underscore the reality that, as
Barthes argued decades ago, the *only* power of the author is to “combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them.” In a culture where the legal rights of already-powerful corporate institutions to “own” culture continue to be expanded to alarming lengths, remix video exposes the inherently intertextual and social nature of writing.

The growing popularity of projects like “CitizenTube” and “Political Remix Video” show that the vernacular genre of remix video has also fueled grass-roots movements on the Internet and have created a wide community of activists looking for ways to use their creativity to make a real difference in the ways that people think and act. This particular quality of identification and community formation is key to many digital composing practices, and these aspects of Web 2.0 will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. While I have until now focused on emerging rhetorical modes in digital media—irreverence as a rhetorical trope and digital remix video as an emerging genre—the next chapter will turn to a more traditional rhetorical genre: *epideictic* rhetoric. Specifically, I hope to show how sites like YouTube have reshaped this classic rhetorical genre and how this remediated genre may function as another form of vernacular rhetoric.
CHAPTER IV. PRIVATE TRUTH, PUBLIC VIDEO, AND THE PEDAGOGY OF DISPLAY:
BEHOLDING YOUTUBE’S EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

The previous two chapters have sketched some emerging genres of online vernacular rhetorical practice—particularly irreverent new media texts such as video parody and several video remix strategies—and the import of those emerging genres to issues of literacy and sustaining democratic culture. In the current chapter, I will attempt to more deeply entrench my discussion of the vernacular rhetorics of Web 2.0 within the rhetorical tradition by exploring the extent to which Web 2.0 has become a site for a remediated form of the classical rhetorical genre of epideictic rhetoric. Outlined first by Aristotle as the rhetoric of praise and blame, epideictic rhetoric is most often associated with commemorative, ceremonial rhetorics, which traditionally emphasize rituals of display. But, as I will discuss in this chapter, scholars over the past few decades have made convincing arguments for epideictic as being a much richer rhetorical practice than Aristotle’s original delineation might lead us to believe at first blush. What’s more, I will argue that Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube provide ample opportunities for vernacular epideictic practice that may hold considerable relevance to sustaining democratic culture.

As a gateway into this discussion, I would like to open with an example which may exemplify both classical and contemporary definitions of the epideictic genre. At the time of this writing, the 2010 Winter Olympics (held in Vancouver, British Columbia) have just concluded, and the fanfare of these games are a good reminder of the intertwined and sometimes competing interests of rhetoric and display, politics and commercialism, individual and institution. Spectacle and ritual has been an important rhetorical part of athletic events since classical Greece, and Robert Danisch argues that, even in antiquity, events like the Olympics gave
individuals an opportunity to display their rhetorical skill while uncovering the hidden truths of the community and pointing out excellence (300). As such, athletes were not only held up solely for their athletic prowess but also for their superior courage, moral strength, and ability to overcome hardship. As exemplars of virtue, athletes came to be emblems of hope and national prosperity, symbols of hard work prevailing against all odds. Thus, Olympic athletes and their actions were commemorated as “paradigms of virtue” to be “summoned as precedents to future cases of moral reasoning” (Adams 293).

In modern times, Olympic rhetoric continues to be epideictic in the traditional sense of the term in that its ceremonies praise the athletic achievement of participants, while also praising and commemorating the larger spirit or ethos of individual nations—particularly the host nation. As Jackie Hogan notes, the opening ceremonies of the Olympics constitute “elaborately staged and commercialized narratives of nation” that affirm national identity through the carefully constructed stories, images, and rituals representing shared experiences for the host nation (102). In other words, the ceremonies of the Olympics work to commemorate that which the participating nations and their people purport to value most about human nature. These ceremonies typically “celebrate universalism both through compulsory rituals and through interpretive segments centering on themes such as the relationship between humanity and nature and the triumph of the human spirit,” with the opening ceremonies serving as a theater for the host nation to “dramatize national myths, experiences, and values, focusing on such themes as the antiquity of the nation and the struggles, triumphs, courage, and character of its people” (104). Yet scholars also note that sporting events like the Olympics serve “as an economy of affect through which power, privilege, politics, and position are (re)produced” (Silk and Falcous 448), and the commemoration of values through narratives of nation also provide an opportunity
for nations to “promote tourism, international corporate investment, trade, and political ideologies” (Hogan 102).

It is in this space that the argumentative push of epideictic exists, though the genre is not always associated with argumentation. While the foremost concern of epideictic may be with amplification of shared values through public commemoration and celebration (Adams 295), it is that amplification of seemingly universal virtues that makes epideictic rhetoric a particularly powerful genre for politicians, public relations organizations, and corporations who look for opportunities to attach their “brand” to a seemingly incontestable series of ideas. A popular advertisement for Visa during the Vancouver Olympics, for example, depicted U.S. speed skater Dan Jansen, whose sister, Jane, died of cancer before Jansen was to compete in the 1988 Olympics. According to the narrative, Jansen had promised Jane he would win Olympic gold; but skating mere hours after the news of his sister’s death, Jansen fell during competition and left the Olympics empty-handed. Six years later, however, Jansen did win a gold medal—and then skated a victory lap while holding his one-year-old daughter, Jane (“Dan Jansen Visa Commercial”).

The 30-second commercial draws its rhetorical effectiveness from narrating (through video and voiceover commentary) themes that are seen as incontestable—among them, the ability to overcome adversity, the strength of the human spirit, and the enduring importance of family. The subtext of the advertisement, then, is that by “buying into” Visa, we are not just purchasing a line of credit; we are also aligning ourselves with the incontestable values presented in the advertisement. Though the logic of the argument is not fully stated, we are able to fill in the rest of the argument based on the premises we already recognize and accept. Epideictic displays often draw from enthymeme in this way, making epideictic rhetoric “rhetorical,
argumentative, by entailing judgment and action through appealing not only to emotions but to reason and ethics” (Sheard 782). Scholars such as Sara Newman, Valerie Smith, and Cara Finnegan, among others, have illustrated the enthymematic properties of visual and gestural rhetorics, suggesting that style and delivery constitute important argumentative functions (Newman 281) that call for judgment based on appeals pointing toward probable premises and conclusions (Smith 122). It is difficult to ignore the important role of enthymeme in any act of epideictic rhetoric, though it likely becomes even more significant in delivery formats—such as video—that favor the moving image over exclusively linguistic expression.

Similarly, while the articulation and amplification of values such as those expressed in the Visa advertisement may not be new to the rhetoric of the Olympic games, it is difficult to ignore the reality that mass media now plays a key role in articulating, amplifying, and publicly commemorating those qualities to a larger viewing audience. In fact, the Olympics constitute “the largest planned televised media event ever—seventeen consecutive nights of viewers glued to their television sets, rooting for their home countries even if they know little about the athletic competitions themselves” (Billings and Angelini 95). With an audience of more than 32 million people in the U.S. alone (Dennis), the ways in which media is used to sustain value systems has potentially enormous consequences for the ways in which those audience members think and act. And with The Nielsen Company reporting that viewers responded favorably to advertisements featuring Olympic themes, such as the Visa video described above, (“Viewers Give High Marks”), it is clear that epideictic rhetoric such as that deployed in the rhetoric of the Olympic games has tremendous capacity for influencing the minds of an engaged audience through the amplification of shared values. As such, the predominantly corporate organizations that own and
operate the majority of our media outlets are in a unique position to strategically shape those narratives in order to accommodate network and sponsor agendas.

As discussed in previous chapters, Web 2.0 technologies and the “we media” movement present profound challenges to corporate mass media. Sites like Facebook and YouTube offer alternative opportunities for epideictic coverage of events like the Olympics, as well. Recognizing the unprecedented reach of social media, major news networks and corporate sponsors continue to find ways to extend their presence to these Web 2.0 sites, likely in an effort to retain control of rhetoric surrounding televised events and to reach as many potential consumers as possible. In fact, some sponsors are said to have referred to the Vancouver Olympics as the “social games,” as advertisers turned to social media for a large percentage of their promotional efforts (Horovitz). The Nielsen Company reported that 13 percent of those watching the Olympics in the U.S. were simultaneously surfing the Internet, with sites like Facebook and YouTube being among the most popular among these “simultaneous users” (“Viewers Go Surfing”).

The corporate presence within Web 2.0 underscores social media as being very much a contested space (as was discussed in the previous two chapters) and speaks also to the contested space of the rhetoric of values itself. Since corporate news coverage has become so fundamental in the process of recirculating paradigms of virtue within popular culture, Web 2.0 threatens to shift the discourse about what we as community members (or even simply as human beings) value most. This shift could have a potentially devastating impact on corporate interests if those emerging epideictic narratives do not support the marketing agendas of stakeholders. For evidence of this capitalist motivation, consider this fact: The International Olympic Committee (IOC) created a YouTube channel for the purpose of sharing hundreds of highlight clips from the
recently completed Vancouver games (as well as separate channels for clips from previous Olympic games) so that viewers could, in the IOC’s words, “relive the magic” of the Olympic events. But since NBC owns the rights to the Olympic broadcast content in the U.S., all video clips on the IOC’s YouTube channels remain blocked in the United States. It seems that American viewers can still “relive the magic” (through the epideictic process of commemorating human excellence), but only via NBC’s television stations and affiliated website, where the network can then profit from those acts of commemoration.

The Olympics, then, provide a useful entry point into the central themes of this chapter: that epideictic rhetoric is an enduring and complex genre of rhetorical practice that holds significant cultural import; that this cultural significance of epideictic rhetoric makes it an appealing tool for those in power to retain control of community discourse and shaping that community’s values; and that media play a vital role in articulating and amplifying those values in contemporary society. To further explicate these themes, I will sketch a more detailed portrait of epideictic rhetoric, suggesting during the course of this discussion that YouTube constitutes an ideal site for epideictic practice in a variety of ways. Drawing from Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation, I will argue that social media now plays an important role in articulating and sustaining the shared values of our culture at the same time that those media also offer channels for challenging the boundaries that are inevitably drawn by those discursive practices. The vernacular potential of this remediated epideictic rhetoric, in fact, is what has the most potential to sustain democratic culture in that it constitutes an expression of values that may differ from those articulated in the master narratives of dominant discourses, particularly as they provide a pedagogical function for future vernacular expressions of citizenship.
Epideictic Rhetoric: Definitions and Departures

As George Kennedy notes, one limitation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is the text’s narrow treatment of epideictic rhetoric (21-22). The “praise and blame” conception of epideictic centers on the rhetorical act of commemorating individuals or actions already held in high esteem by a community (e.g., speeches given for lifetime achievement awards) or condemning those already seen to be the target of collective scorn (e.g., speeches condemning acts of violence against members of the community). In ancient Greece, praise and blame speeches were also used to showcase a rhetor’s rhetorical prowess for the pleasure of an audience of judges. Scott Consigny articulates this perception of epideictic as being exclusively a vehicle for demonstrating rhetorical skill, noting that in this conception, the rhetor is free to arbitrarily adopt any frivolous position, “as long as it affords him an opportunity to exhibit his rhetorical prowess” (281). This perceived lack of civic exigency, as well as the fact that epideictic practice involves the “expression of ideas already held in shared belief” (Howard 184), leads to perceptions of the epideictic genre as being inferior to other forms of rhetorical practice. In contrast to rhetorics that emphasize direct argumentation or oppositional stances, epideictic rhetoric, as Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard points out, “can be seen as both beginning and ending in agreement” (766). Whereas deliberative and forensic rhetorics involve speakers persuading audiences to pursue a particular course of action or move toward some change, the traditional conception of epideictic oratory suggests that audiences to epideictic speeches “merely applauded and went away” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 47-48).

This perceived lack of exigency and argumentative intensity is likely what gives epideictic rhetoric the reputation for being the “most mere” of all “mere rhetoric,” dismissed for its apparent “privileging of style above substance” (Rollins 7). But this conception ignores the
fact that style is an important component to enthymematic arguments (Newman 282), which would include most if not all epideictic displays. Further, scholars like Brooke Rollins note that the pejorative attitude toward epideictic’s aesthetic preoccupation unfairly dismisses the cultural import of display and values rhetoric only for purposes that are deemed “practical” (8). As we shall see, the aesthetic character so key to the epideictic genre has a variety of consequences that, while perhaps not inextricably or necessarily tied to forensic or deliberative rhetorics, still provide important cultural functions.

An Aesthetic of Values

Still, one cannot ignore the fact that preoccupation with aesthetic excellence is part of what distinguishes the epideictic genre from other forms of rhetorical practice. Epideictic rhetors must craft a presentation that is aesthetically appealing to the audience (Richards 7), often using “excess and exaggeration to display the dominant values of a culture and to perpetuate the prevalent system of beliefs” (Danisch 300). This tendency toward the spectacular and exaggerated aesthetic is likely due to the importance of communal feeling to the epideictic experience. As Adams notes,

The emotional experience completes the observers’ intellectual grasp (understanding) of the relationship between the concept of virtue and its concrete manifestation in an exemplar. For example, the audience must appropriately feel the influence of a community member’s courage to fully interpret the exemplar’s significance. It is the unquestionable quality of communal feeling as much as the conceptual grasp of the narrated paradigm case’s exemplification of virtue that fixes the exemplar’s place in public memory. (296).
The flashiness of epideictic performances, then, ideally produce a shared emotional response within audience members—a response that emerges from a collective predisposition toward the virtues being exaggerated within the epideictic narrative. In the case of the Olympic opening ceremonies mentioned earlier, spectacular displays of national pride require deep reflection on the part of those crafting the message to determine which values of the community should be publicly commemorated (and, by extension, which should be collectively “forgotten”). The self-consciousness associated with this kind of display encourages critical reflection and can, as Sheard notes, “help us to scrutinize our own privately and publicly held beliefs and prejudices, to evaluate them, and to decide whether to reaffirm or reform them” (777). And while it is true that the epideictic genre draws much of its power from the poetic “style” of words, sound, and images, Consigny and others have argued that learning the discursive forms and etiquette of specific discourse communities is an essential part of audience analysis (286-287), likely because the pleasure audiences derive from style is drawn itself from a set of context-based value judgments.

To truly succeed as an epideictic rhetor, then, one must be able to adapt to the needs of a wide range of audiences—needs that involve cultural attitudes and linguistic practices underscoring the values and beliefs of the community. While this point in itself seems to problematize Aristotle’s definition, Lois Agnew suggests that Aristotle’s seemingly reductive articulation of epideictic likely reflects his assumption that the praise and blame rhetoric he describes “necessarily involves a broader exploration of the public values that would shape the audience’s assumptions concerning the definition of those terms” (150). Therefore, as Consigny also argues, the audience-savvy epideictic rhetor “‘shows’ or displays himself as a performer adapting to diverse discourses, simultaneously using and exposing his own pragmatic skills”
While epideictic performances present community values as being universal and incontestable, the importance of *doxa* to successful epideictic rhetoric—that is, the crafting of rhetoric to accommodate commonly held beliefs of a particular community—show that classical rhetors recognized the contextual and culturally relative nature of value systems. The ability to analyze and draw from these value systems to support rhetorical performance meant that the rhetor would be more skillfully adept at building common ground between the speaker and her audience.

Yet it is important to note here that contemporary society has different obstacles to articulating larger community values. Danisch notes that ancient Athens did not share the same competition between ethnic subgroups as do the major democratic societies of our time, and its fairly homogeneous culture likely made it less difficult to establish a communal identity (298). In response, while Danisch agrees with much of what scholars like Gerard Hauser and John Poulakos have argued about epideictic rhetoric’s ties to sustaining democratic culture, he suggests that contemporary epideictic rhetoric must “find a set of epideictic practices for multicultural democracies that avoid the desire to eliminate difference and to theorize how such practices would influence public life” (301). Moving toward such a conception of epideictic practice—one that takes pluralism of democratic society into account—would help to construct a theory of epideictic that transcends “an idealized notion of the public sphere” (301) and would instead value vernacular expressions of commemoration.

**Remediating Epideictic Rhetoric**

It is in this vein that Web 2.0 technologies may provide a useful means for inviting and extending a vernacular form of epideictic practice. In fact, the spectacular quality of the moving image, emphasis on interactivity, wide-reaching community-building potential, and pedagogical
value of Web 2.0 technologies may make these spaces particularly suited to epideictic rhetoric. As Web 2.0 technologies and arenas such as YouTube continue to emerge as important discursive arenas, I am arguing that they become sites for the practice of remediated forms of traditional rhetorical genres. In using the term *remediation*, I draw from the work of Bolter and Grusin, who describe the “double logic of remediation” (55) as the mutually shaping process of old and new media. They argue that old media is never fully displaced by new media, just as new media always retains certain aspects of the old media (47). Remediation is similar to what Henry Jenkins calls “convergence culture,” a perspective that “assumes that old and new media will interact in ever more complex ways” (5-6), as well as the principles of remix discussed in the previous chapter.

With this concept in mind, I am suggesting that Web 2.0 technologies have not only remediated writing technologies themselves but also have remediated the very modes of rhetorical practice. In the case of epideictic rhetoric, for example, the classical genre responds and shifts to accommodate the rhetorical exigencies of a multimodal society—at the same time that Web 2.0 environments shift and adjust to accommodate this rhetorical practice that, as the Olympics example shows, continues to perform an important social function in modern times. Epideictic rhetoric retains many of the same elements that it has since the ancients practiced it; but the transparency, immediacy, and wide-reaching audience capabilities of Web 2.0 make this new epideictic one that the ancients likely never could have imagined. And, to extend Adams’s claim that epideictic rhetoric requires an audience to share “the same linguistic predisposition” toward speech acts and their ability to reveal morally exemplary actions (293), I argue that a remediated form of epideictic reflects the movement Gunther Kress describes from linguistic predisposition to one that accounts for the power and importance of semiotics (36). Given the
accessibility that Web 2.0 technologies afford for average individuals to be able to access the materials for constructing messages of such semiotic power and distributing them to a wide audience through the power of social networking, a remediated epideictic may have profound consequences for shaping public opinion and the articulation of shared beliefs.

“Broadcast Yourself”: YouTube’s Epideictic Spirit

In the specific case of YouTube, the site offers individuals from across race, ethnic, gender, ability, and class boundaries to view and upload clips that are of interest or significance to them—to, as it were, put their values on display. In fact, self-conscious display and critical spectatorship are fundamental parts of the YouTube culture and make the site particularly suited to epideictic practice. Individuals upload videos with the intention of having their compositions viewed and evaluated by others. The purpose may be to garner responses about technical execution or other surface matters (in keeping with more traditional notions of the epideictic audience), but the purpose may also be to articulate values through those self-conscious displays in order to commemorate the virtues that are important to a particular community, and in doing so, to strengthen the solidarity of that community.

The reciprocal relationship between individual and community interests is also seen in the site’s consistent, ever-present emphasis on “you” (i.e., YouTube, Broadcast Yourself, etc.), which works to keep individuals situated in a state of personal response and reflection at the same time that it encourages individuals to dialogue with others. In April of 2007, for example, YouTube launched “Citizentube,” a section of the site devoted exclusively to videos that discuss political issues. The initial “Welcome to Citizentube” video asks users (through a powerful juxtaposition of text, images, and sound) to respond to “what issues are important to YOU. Post
a response. People are watching.” As Michele White states in her study of internet spectatorship,

The Internet spectator is targeted with pronouns like ‘you’ in order to make it seems as if the text is produced specifically for the individual. This direct address…encourages the viewer to have a more personal engagement. Direct address appears to acknowledge personal interests while allowing the media producer to render an even more detailed version of the spectator’s desires, viewing behaviors, and buying habits (White 24). Just as epideictic displays work to evoke emotion within a collective audience by drawing upon shared values, YouTube’s pervasive use of the second-person address helps to evoke in users a sense of being brought into focus in an arena where each individual’s beliefs and values matter. White is wise to caution that the emotional response garnered by this use of the second-person address may indeed serve marketing agendas—an important consideration in light of the increased corporate presence within Web 2.0 environments (discussed more thoroughly in previous chapters). However, this kind of personal address also serves to highlight the site’s location of agency within the individual as she is encouraged to dialogue with other members of the community through the construction of videos and channels, with user-created links between videos and channels serve to construct complex community networks.

This linking feature of sites like YouTube underscores the community-building and linking focus of Web 2.0 applications, as the interactivity of such sites lets users interact within complex networks in order to form communities surrounding shared interests. Gunther Kress also argues that interactivity—particularly the ability to “’write back’ to the producer of a text with no difficulty,” adds an interpersonal dimension to new media not seen with older media, which has a direct effect on social and semiotic power relations (5). Combining these interactive,
community-building features with multiple avenues for user-to-user response and dialogue shows that the ability to form communities is not only possible on YouTube, but is in fact an intended and encouraged outcome of being a user of the site. Since epideictic rhetoric relies on shared community values and discursive practices, the ability for users to create and define their own communities and articulate those values through the sharing of videos, textual comments, and linkages thus lays the groundwork for ongoing epideictic practice.

YouTube served as a space for college students to collectively respond to the tragic April 16, 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, which claimed the lives of 32 students. In the confused aftermath of the shooting, various tributes began to appear on sites like YouTube and Facebook, in which students would post words of encouragement to Virginia Tech students and families, share memories of the deceased, and otherwise rally together as a community, using Internet technologies as both gathering spaces and modes of communication. As epideictic rhetoric is often most prevalent during times when a community is trying to cope with calamity (Adams 293), it is perhaps not surprising that many individuals turned to video for epideictic expressions of community and hope. Several videos were created and then shared on YouTube as expressions of solidarity amongst college students across the nation. One video, called simply “Virginia Tech Tribute,” begins with still photos from media coverage of the shooting, set to Avril Lavigne’s “Keep Holding On,” which opens with the lyrics “You’re not alone / Together we stand / I’ll be by your side / you know I’ll take your hand”—lyrics clearly chosen as a means of communicating a sense of unity and community strength. The opening screen features text that reads, “[t]his is a tragedy in American history. So for today, forget any and all of your college affiliations.” Featuring a compilation remix strategy similar to the “Gay Rights” video discussed in Chapter 3, the “Virginia Tech Tribute” video proceeds with a series of photos drawn
from news media coverage of the aftermath. These photos include images of Virginia Tech students crying and huddling together for comfort, law enforcement running toward the scene, and loved ones reuniting, as well as more symbolic images such as that of a candle burning. Then, after a screen that proclaims “…For today, we are all Hokies” (referring to the Virginia Tech mascot), the video proceeds with a series of college and university logos, with each logo combined in some manner with a black ribbon and the letters “VT” (for Virginia Tech); many also include the “Today, we are all Hokies” refrain and other messages of solidarity and hope. Other Virginia Tech tribute videos are presented in a similar way, generally with variations in music selection or in the presentation of university logos, but with similar expressions of unity in face of a community member’s crisis.

The epideictic properties in videos like the “Virginia Tech Tribute” are fairly apparent, as tributes and eulogies typify traditional conceptions of the genre. Namely, the video expresses the shared feeling of a community—in this case, colleges and universities—calling for members to unite together in remembrance of those who have fallen and in support of those who remain. Additionally, the videos explicitly create common ground and identification, reinforcing community values by employing editorial choices that call upon those shared values for rhetorical effect. The song choice, for example, is one that would likely be known to many college-aged students, and the inclusion of college/university logos in a single text amplifies the importance of solidarity in crisis—it is a time to put school rivalries aside. Thus, the video “respond[s] therapeutically” in an effort to “restabilize individuals and community through healing rhetoric” (Sheard 790). These types of videos in a sense redraw the boundaries of college communities by redistributing the common features shared by all members and applying those features in such a way that a new discursive identity was created to fulfill a specific need. The
videos represent rhetorical decisions to highlight similarities and exclude differences in order to fit the collective empathetic response to a community member’s pain. With Web 2.0 technologies making it easier for individuals to collect and compile items such as multiple university logos into a single text, individuals are able to use YouTube as a platform for the articulation and amplification of shared values during a time of crisis—and the video medium allows a wider audience of spectators to watch and be moved by the epideictic display.

*The “Noise” of the Beholding Audience*

It is worth noting here that audience response, while always important in rhetorical theory, has a unique presence in conceptions of epideictic rhetoric. Debra Hawhee describes the key role of the noisy crowd to the epideictic process, arguing that “the crowd constantly reminds performers of its active presence as it gathers and participates in the circulation of honor and shame through its pulsing, thunderous noise” (182). In other words, the noise of the audience is part of how epideictic rhetors are able to measure their effectiveness, presumably because the collective clapping, stomping, booing, and laughing of coliseum environments like those of ancient Greece would speak to the shared emotional experiences of the audience. Interestingly, sites like YouTube seem to both depend on and problematize traditional notions of audience, since YouTube rhetors do not necessarily “see” their collective audiences. Furthermore, they do not experience the noise and response of the crowd in the way that Hawhee describes. Yet while there may not be the kind of collective din experienced within a festival setting or gymnasium, I argue that YouTube audiences use a variety of interactive tools provided by the site to create their own kind of “noisy” response that helps to enable continued agonistic display. And, as White points out, the interactivity of websites such as YouTube is part of what creates an empowered spectator, since audiences can express themselves through the manipulation and
control of the material they encounter on the web (36) and can align themselves with or against epideictic expressions of values through a variety of linking, tagging, and commenting features provided by Web 2.0 technologies.

On YouTube, individuals often encourage and anticipate responses from viewers by, for example, concluding videos by directly addressing viewers and asking them to reply with videos in the hopes of starting or continuing a dialogue. Thus, the site’s aforementioned focus on “you” combines with interactive features to give both rhetors and spectators a sense of agency through audience response. These responses most often come by way of written comments to the video, which are displayed in reverse chronological order on the video’s page, or through video responses. The video response option allows users to upload a video that then appears threaded to the original video (with an “RE:” in the title), and a link is provided that allows users to see all video responses to a particular video. This option, in fact, allows users on some level to “see” their YouTube audience—perhaps not the same as a packed stadium, but still a visual representation of the collected audience that might otherwise be a mere abstraction, measured solely by number of views or ratings. Other options for audience response are offered, as well, such as user “channels,” where individual users can set up a profile that displays all of their uploaded videos, as well as their favorites of others, and where users can leave comments similar to a MySpace or Facebook wall.

While audience response seems to be a major focus of the site, and while various methods of audience response are offered, the quality of those responses varies significantly. Written comments to videos or users tend to consist of a few words expressing a user’s knee-jerk reactions, off-handed remarks of praise or scorn, or casual observations about the environment or other surface matters of the video or user. In this way, the written comments seem to fit more
with the traditional conception of epideictic audience response because they are focused more on surface matters and do not go into much detail or reflect much critical thinking about the content of the performance being discussed. Given that alphabetic discourse is not the primary language of YouTube, it’s not surprising that these comments tend to be lacking richness or complexity of critique. Instead, videos are the privileged mode of discourse, and therefore the video responses tend to be richer and more inclined to express identification with or opposition to the values and ideas articulated by the video in question.

Regardless of which avenues viewers take to respond, the fact remains that, in the epideictic tradition, the act of beholding is powerful and of great rhetorical importance. As Beverly James notes, the experience of epideictic beholding involves

being open, unself-consciously, to restoration in public memory of an ideal once embodied in a fleeting but wonderful event. Visual and narrative acts of commemoration are not necessarily mere propaganda, recirculating the clichés and commonplaces of established thought. They can involve efforts to sort out for recollection ideals amidst the early rumblings of political changes. And herein is epideictic’s subversive dimension, so largely overlooked in previous studies” (171).

Rosenfeld also recognizes the power of beholding (he uses the term theoros, or “witness”), arguing that the epideictic audience is invited to “see [the event] for what it is…rather than to impose on it some assessment…that might transform it” (140). With the moving image providing the increased immediacy and transparency described by Bolter and Grusin (273), viewers are able to immerse themselves in the epideictic process of beholding as they interact with video. Further, the ability of the YouTube site to serve as an archive for epideictic displays means that
viewers can engage these epideictic experiences again and again, perhaps allowing those “fleeting but wonderful” events to be commemorated an infinite number of times.

*Seeing is Believing: Showing Off and Showing Forth*

With epideictic’s strong ties to spectatorship and self-conscious display, it is not surprising that individuals might turn to video as a vehicle for epideictic expression. Yet it is important to note the dramatic epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings of epideictic display. In his exploration of the term’s etymology, Lawrence Rosenfield suggests that our translation of the term “epideictic” to the term “display” ignores the spirit of exhibiting “notable deeds in order to let us gaze at the aura glowing from within” (135). Hawhee also points out how the term alludes to the epistemological underpinnings of the practice, since *epideixis* refers to “a display, a demonstration, a showing forth, a making known” (174). This process of “making known” begins with a personal understanding and moves toward something more transactional, as epideictic’s emphasis on display essentially brings privately held knowledge into public view for audience consideration and evaluation. This made epideictic oratory a popular pedagogical tool for the sophists, and Consigny points out how Gorgias seems to be modeling his rhetorical maneuverings in *Helen*: “it appears that Gorgias also uses his epideictic works as educational and polemical instruments. […] For Gorgias appears to deliberately *draw attention* to his own techniques of adaptation and deception” (291). Here, Consigny shows how epideictic rhetoric can be useful for modeling techniques for students, thereby helping students to advance their own aesthetic competencies. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have noted,

> the speaker engaged in epideictic discourse is very close to being an educator. Since what he is going to say does not arouse controversy, since no immediate practical interest is ever involved, and there is no question of attacking or defending, but simply of
promoting values that are shared in the community….For it is not his own cause or viewpoint that he is defending, but that of his entire audience. (qtd in Adams, 294).

Given epideictic’s emphasis on the process of “making visible,” it is not surprising that scholars have begun to consider the particular significance of visual symbols in epideictic display. In her discussion of needlework as epideictic rhetoric, for example, Sue Carter argues that visual symbols support the epideictic task of “inculcating commonly held values and increasing the intensity of an audience’s adherence to those values” (327). Similarly, what Debra Hawhee calls the Presocratic “logic of vision” recognized the interconnectedness of seeing, knowing, motion, and emotion, since “the visual operates both through and in tandem with discourse as logos reproduces and circulates the visible” (183-184). This privileging of the visual and material perhaps makes video-sharing sites like YouTube particularly fertile grounds for epideictic rhetoric because of the way that we, as a culture, have to “see” it to believe it.

On one hand, YouTube encourages a kind of display that might be dismissed as merely “showing off,” in keeping with many traditional conceptions of epideictic rhetoric being simply an aesthetic genre. One video, made by a highly popular YouTube user, Renetto, demonstrates his “version” of a well-known Mentos/Diet Coke “experiment” (“Diet Coke + Mentos”) in which, as the lore goes, these substances are combined to create spectacular fountains of volcanic soda eruptions. Although Renetto’s video is less than a minute and a half long and could be dismissed by some as being little more than a humorous stunt designed to entertain fans, Renetto’s video nevertheless had garnered more than 11 million views, more than 24,000 ratings, more than 19,000 comments, and 126 video responses at the time of this writing. Many of the video responses showed users repeating Renetto’s experiment, adding their own variations (“remixing,” as it were, in keeping with strategies discussed in Chapter 3), and oftentimes
addressing Renetto by name. Thus, Renetto in a sense made visible a new rhetorical formula that other users imitated and adapted in order to dialogue with him, as well as to try to “outdo” him in terms of entertaining viewers. This kind of fostering of imitative responses that draw upon formulaic constructions is reminiscent of Greek pedagogical practices that focused on students utilizing epideictic practices of imitation and adaptation (often by reciting good or bad speeches by other rhetors) to advance rhetorical competency. Renetto’s spectacle created a new genre within an online community at the same time that it invoked the competitive aspect of epideictic rhetoric by triangulating competition through the audience (McKenzie 177), since users compete to create the funniest or otherwise “best” version of the original.

But this playful example of “showing off” does not negate the potential for the video medium to also make visible—and simultaneously push the boundaries of—other values and virtues within a community. In fact, video is unique in that it can make apparent ideas and realities that may not be articulated as effectively in another medium, which lends itself well to critical purposes. For example, one video, “In My Language,” offers a compelling rhetorical statement by a person with autism. The first half of the video features an interesting juxtaposition of images of the individual’s hands, eyes, and other features with audio of her vocalizations, immersing viewers in an uncomfortable spectating position before offering an interpretation for that experience in the second half of the video. The individual, who is able to communicate by typing words into a computer program that we then hear “speaking” those words for our benefit, refers to several commonly held beliefs about the value of language, the importance of communication, and the connection between these literacies and thinking. But through the course of the video, this person also offers a critique of those values by illustrating common
misperceptions about the thinking capacities of individuals with autism—misperceptions that are fueled by our assumptions about communication and literacy practices.

While she is putting herself on display, she does so not to “show off” or foster a competitive, jubilant mood the way the Renetto video does. She also resists the predatory gaze that might be associated with differently abled performances (particularly, I would argue, those presented by women) by stating directly that she is not making the video to put herself on display in a vulnerable manner, but instead seeks to change perceptions and misperceptions about autism, language, thinking, and communicating: “This is not a look-at-the-autie gawking freakshow as much as it is a statement about what gets considered thought, intelligence, personhood, language, and communication, and what does not.” The video medium thus allows this individual to present a more nuanced form of epideictic practice—one that acknowledges our shared values about what it means to think and communicate at the same time that it actively works against those norms. In doing so, this individual presents a text that fulfills what Agnew sees as being the “true promise” of epideictic by engaging viewers in a reflective practice that is both constrained and creative as it engages with social issues (151-152). As Sheard argues, the “epideictic moment” may be therapeutic in nature in an effort to restabilize a community in crisis (as is the case in the Virginia Tech tributes discussed above); but it may also be critical in an attempt to “destabilize current conditions so that long-term stability is made possible” (790). The latter is true for “In My Language, whose showing forth of a private experience is used to critique existing norms, thereby posing a pedagogical function by teaching viewers and offering a vision of the future. In short, the immediacy of the video format and the self-publishing capabilities of YouTube allow her to bring her private knowledge and critique into public view—
with nearly 900,000 views at the time of this writing— in order to imagine an “alternative world that might accommodate us all” (Sheard 791).

A Moment in Time: Video and Temporal Tensions of Epideictic

As mentioned previously, the values and boundaries that are articulated (and, in the case of the video I’ve just discussed, challenged) by epideictic displays require that rhetor and audience connect and agree upon a set of shared values and beliefs. Because of this, epideictic is closely linked with the present, since shared community values often change based on a community’s current cultural concerns. Aristotle argues that epideictic rhetoric is inextricably concerned with the present: “the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future” (*Rhetoric* 1358b). Halloran and Clark note differing scholarly interpretations of the importance of time and timing to the epideictic act, suggesting that one perspective emphasizes that “the timeless aspect of epideictic and collective memory is consumed in timeliness,” whereas others argue that epideictic moments are themselves out of time (154). Aristotle seems to be suggesting that epideictic occupies the space between deliberative and forensic traditions—a space where audiences are aware of the past and acknowledging the future at the same time that that are fully consumed by the spectacle of the present. In other words, epideictic rhetoric demonstrates for audiences “a continuity between past, present, and future events” (Agnew 150) at the same time that it demands audiences to be focused on the present.

This emphasis on the present also makes epideictic particularly suited to new media environments. Studies of media have shown that collapsing time and space into the transmission of the video itself serves to afford viewers a sense of community and “the optimum sense of
immediacy and intimacy‖ (Biressi 4). In his discussion of the epideictic rhetoric of television talk shows, Robert McKenzie also notes how video-driven media such as television immerse viewers in the present:

the continuous stream of programs on television provides little opportunity for the audience to reflect on content that rapidly moves to the past; they must focus instead on what is immediate to the television screen (Gunter, 1987). Thus, an epistemology of making meaning chiefly in the present is fundamental to both epideictic discourse and to the symbolic form of television. (196-197).

YouTube similarly immerses viewers in the present, since the actual viewing of each video constitutes its own discrete experience in which the user must be focused on the immediate spectacle on their screen. In other words, videos on YouTube are always already in the present.

Conclusion

The aesthetic of values and subsequent epistemological and pedagogical benefits discussed thus far make epideictic rhetoric a rich rhetorical genre, and scholars have argued that these features of epideictic may have important ramification for civic participation. Sheard focuses on this civic potential for epideictic rhetoric, which is a significant departure from the ritualistic and ceremonial traditions most commonly associated with epideictic—traditions that have until recently kept epideictic relegated to the realms of funeral orations and other ceremonies. Sheard argues this case convincingly by pointing out how epideictic rhetoric oftentimes begins with a problem to be solved or some sort of change to be worked toward, which would provide an excellent foundation for (if not essential pre-requisite to) forensic and deliberative rhetoric (776). For Sheard, this motion toward change is made through the use of blame topoi that the rhetor calls upon in order to encourage the audience to reflect and act: “the
blame […] is not simply pinned on a scapegoat that becomes the subject of the speech. Instead, the blame is laid upon the *audience* of the speech as well” (780, emphasis added). The agency is located in the minds of the collective epideictic audience, which makes the aforementioned attention to shared values all the more essential: once shared values are established, the rhetor can move toward creating a shared *vision* of the future and can offer a clear sense of how audience members can help to make that vision a reality. The civic potential of epideictic rhetoric lays in its capacity to advance an alternate vision of the future for audiences in the present “by making its vision a reality for its audience and instilling a belief that the power for realizing the vision lies with them” (781). In this way, epideictic rhetoric has the capacity to “reinforce and to transform the community through creating a shared vision, even as it acknowledges the difference that ultimately creates the potential and the need for change” (Agnew 153).

It is important to note here that this reframing does not require us to divorce epideictic rhetoric from the rituals that for so long have clearly distinguished it from the other rhetorical branches, nor would such a separation be desirable. My goal in this chapter is not to extend the definition of epideictic so far that it no longer has any defining shape, or to “value epideictic rhetoric only insofar as it is no longer epideictic rhetoric” (Rollins 9). Rather, my goal is to echo those who have argued that epideictic should not be dismissed as being merely gratuitous or completely irrelevant to civic life. As Sheard notes, ceremonial practices of epideictic display “reflect a kind of discourse whose themes and exigencies might appear to its audience as timeless and transcendent or ‘universal’ rather than timely, kairotic, and culturally based. Hence, we have come to regard epideictic discourse as more spiritual and private than civic and social and to see its audience’s role as passive rather than active” (768). Similarly, the ornate display
and poetic aesthetic so often associated with epideictic rhetoric have traditionally overpowered its civic possibilities, despite the fact that aesthetic-oriented approaches to rhetorical practice (such as enthymeme) continue to be used by cultural gatekeepers as a means of sustaining the status quo. As a response, my goal in this chapter has been to illustrate how the aesthetic preoccupation of epideictic provide important cultural functions in terms of articulating, amplifying, and sustaining community values. Additionally, I have attempted to show how sites like YouTube encourage a remediated form of epideictic practice that may provide another avenue for average individuals to sustain and participate in public discourse about values.

But above all, what I hope this discussion illustrates is the value of epideictic rhetoric in sustaining a democratic culture through vernacular expression. In terms of vernacular rhetoric, I have argued above that YouTube invites epideictic practice in a variety of ways, and ordinary people are thus given an opportunity to participate in the public expression of values that is usually reserved for those already in a position of power, as the corporate-backed Olympics example that opened this chapter illustrates. Since epideictic plays such an important role in articulating and sustaining the shared values of a community, it is important that members of that community—and not solely those already in power—be able to carve out public sites for epideictic practice. Thus, epideictic expression on the part of the average YouTube user has potentially huge ramifications for the ways that values are articulated and amplified in our society. Gerard Hauser describes the importance of these types of vernacular expressions to our sense of community identity—a discussion that is worth quoting at length here:

They are not formal exchanges of the podium; they are vernacular expressions of who we are, what we need and hope for, what we are willing to accept, and our commitment to reciprocity. Yet we also direct these conversations toward our public problems, and they
often are the means available to us for ‘reading’ our neighborhood and community, the political and social climate of the polity, and for expressing our beliefs and attitudes on these matters to others. These dialogizing interactions are our continuous means to form shared meaning; discover new cultural, political, and social possibilities; and shape an understanding of our common interests. They are integral to civil society’s continuous activity of self-regulation. They are the definitively rhetorical exchanges that confront us with the open possibilities Bakhtin attributes to internally persuasive speech. They are the ways by which publics make their presence known; and, if we were to listen, these are the ways by which they make their opinions felt. (Vernacular Voices, 11).

To return to articulation theory, an examination of epideictic practices questions the seemed universality of the values presented by epideictic practice, instead examining “the ideological glue that binds them together” (Jung 161). The unified narrative of values presented by epideictic displays is in itself a “linking of elements into a temporary unity” that is “contingent and particular and is the result of a political and historical struggle” (DeLuca 335). Publics can use sites like YouTube to make their presence known and their opinions felt by constructing value-based epideictic narratives in multiple media and distributing those compositions via Web 2.0 platforms. Thus, it is not only true that epideictic practice and genres are being remediated—the very fabric of participatory discourse in democratic culture is being remediated to account for the needs of a multimodal society. Democracy, to borrow from Jenkins’ discussion of convergence culture, is “an old concept taking on new meanings” (6) as it shifts to accommodate cultural shifts across media, and those media simultaneously adjust to accommodate the needs of citizens.
On that note, to return to Danisch’s call for a model of epideictic that does not erase difference as it works toward articulating shared values, I hope that the picture of epideictic practice I have painted in this chapter is consistent with a practice that “works both to reinforce and to transform the community through creating a shared vision, even as it acknowledges the difference that ultimately creates the potential and the need for change” (Agnew 153). Since the genre has a potential to “promote alternative public norms, identities, and practices” (Richards 2, emphasis added), and since Web 2.0 provides opportunities for individuals to express those alternative viewpoints, vernacular epideictic may be one of the most powerful rhetorical strategies for reinvigorating democratic culture. While Adams questions the extent to which epideictic can continue to be a viable genre in a culture increasingly wrought by skepticism and cynicism (305), the fact remains that we remain predisposed to certain images, words, and sounds—a predisposition that emerges from our value systems.

Whether they be narratives of nation presented in large sporting events like the Olympic games, expressions of solidarity and hope as in the Virginia Tech memorial videos, playful displays of humor and competition like the Renetto video, commentary on the ways we think and perceive each other such as in “In My Language,” or otherwise, epideictic rhetoric continues to play an important role in articulating the values and virtues of our communities. A vernacular epideictic that borrows strategies favored by those in power in order to redraw the boundaries of community and re-articulate the values shared by that community holds considerable potential to subvert existing orders. And given the connections we’ve seen between epideictic practice and epistemology, participating in self-conscious, critical epideictic rhetoric has the potential to expose the underlying assumptions and values of a community and bring private, vernacular, heteroglossic truths to public dialogue, particularly since the act of consuming that was “once
silent and invisible is now noisy and public” (Jenkins 18-19). It is essential that this semiotic predisposition be part of the critical literacy of our citizens and our students, lest we risk the chance of being at the whim of corporate and government master narratives that seek to reinforce the status quo and peddle agendas on the backs of seemingly incontestable values. I will explore the import of fostering critical literacy among students in the final chapter, which will more thoroughly examine the theoretical and pedagogical ramifications of the vernacular rhetorics of Web 2.0 I have articulated in this and previous chapters.
CHAPTER V. THE FUTURE OF LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY IN A WEB 2.0 WORLD

Though it has been nearly four years since *Time Magazine* named “you” the 2006 “Person of the Year,” the Web 2.0 phenomenon persists, with implications for virtually all sectors of modern culture. Ironically, the ubiquitous nature of these technologies is perhaps part of what makes defining and theorizing Web 2.0 so challenging. Scholars such as Felicia Wu Song argue that the term itself is problematic, as it is now “applied to virtually every new application or digital start-up business, resulting in conceptual vagueness at best and absolute meaningfulness at worst” (250). Yet it may be this seemed amorphousness of Web 2.0 that gives it its power as a vernacular discursive arena, since it resists the kind of totalizing theory that inevitably privileges some voices and marginalizes others.

That said, it is impossible to study, make sense of, and learn from Web 2.0 without some operational definitions, nebulous and problematic as those definitions may sometimes be. And if we return to some of the features articulated by Tim O’Reilly and Andrew McAfee, it is clear that the user-driven, decentralized, highly-networked, interactive properties of Web 2.0 technologies hold many attractive possibilities for sustaining democratic culture both on and offline. Further, we must remember that Web 2.0 refers to an *evolution* in the way knowledge is created and shared (Burgess 9). In other words, “Web 2.0” doesn’t just describe a series of technologies that exist online; it also refers to an emerging way of thinking, doing, and being, giving way to forms of “vernacular creativity” that extend “out into the flows between offline everyday life and the networked public sphere” (8). While the term may be most closely associated with online practices, being a “society of the screen” also involves complex relationships with physical space, our bodies, and each other (Manovich 94). Thus, Web 2.0 speaks to a whole host of cultural practices and attitudes within the larger cultural milieu and has
very real ramifications for public discourse in a world where the binary between life “online” and life “offline” is becoming increasingly blurred.

In response to these exigencies, this dissertation has been an attempt to contribute to the theory-building effort surrounding composition studies and Web 2.0, to transition from “grandiloquent hype to theoretically and empirically grounded hope” (Burgess 2). Yet in an effort to avoid the kinds of totalizing theories described above, this dissertation is also an effort to expand the kinds of rhetorical practices that “count” in our theoretical frameworks, and to show how these everyday, vernacular expressions within Web 2.0 cultures play an important role in sustaining a democratic culture. In this concluding chapter, I will first return to some of the major findings of this dissertation and will then suggest some of the ramifications these findings have for theory and practice. Although I argue that scholars and teachers must remediate their approaches to rhetorical theory and writing pedagogy, I will also acknowledge limitations and cautions that must be taken into consideration as we map the trajectory of our field. I will also suggest some areas where continued research is needed in order to more fully realize the scholarly and pedagogical significance of Web 2.0.

Speaking Back: The Spirit of Web 2.0

The “public” of Web 2.0 emerges via a range of participatory platforms; and as we continue to struggle with defining the shape of the Web 2.0 movement, we must remember also to take stock of the ways in which Web 2.0 defines itself. As of this writing, for example, the Wikipedia entry for “Web 2.0” includes the following image, presented in “tag cloud” format (itself a Web 2.0 phenomenon) to illustrate many Web 2.0 themes:
Keywords presented in this image, including “remixability,” “collaboration,” “accessibility,” “sharing,” “participation,” “user centered,” and so on, suggest that Web 2.0 is an arena whose ethos is deeply rooted in the notion that the commons—the “ordinary” people, ideas, and artifacts of a given community—are valuable. Whether that community be a nation or a neighborhood, the fact remains that the “read/write” movement is being perpetuated by those who embrace participation and by those who seek to craft a discursive platform within the increasingly noisy *agon* of contemporary life. If we fail to take these self-defining practices into account, we run the risk of missing the essence of what makes Web 2.0 what it is.

Put simply, Web 2.0 has changed the rules about who is allowed to “speak” in public arenas, and this dissertation has shown that those voices often come by way of “new media,” or digital works that incorporate various combinations of alphabetic text, sound, still images, video, and design elements. This dissertation has also shown how bringing more voices into public dialogue in this way and infusing informal discourses into realms of public deliberation that are perceived as being previously off-limits has far-reaching consequences for the ways that
knowledge is constructed, the ways that values are sustained in our communities, and the ways that cultural institutions and gatekeepers interact with their constituents. The “democratization” of the Web has been made possible through these technologies that let average people share themselves and their ideas in ways that previously were reserved for only the cultural elite. As a result of this leveling of the discursive playing field, a participatory culture has emerged wherein, as Henry Jenkins notes, “media producers and consumers no longer fit into such tidy categories,” now instead finding ways to “interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (3).

However, it is important to note here that Web 2.0 is not truly democratic, particularly as mass media conglomerates, advertising giants, government institutions, and other gatekeepers continue to resist many of the features that make Web 2.0 more democratic than other forms of media. As we saw with the CNN-YouTube Debates, for example (discussed in Chapter 2), politicians recognize that active utilization of Web 2.0 runs the risk of giving up control of campaign discourse—a risk that most are not willing to take. Further, the vernacular composing strategies common to Web 2.0 environments are often characterized by politicians and others as being inappropriate, irrational, and irrelevant to matters of public importance. Combine these attitudes toward citizens with CNN’s complete control of the agenda-setting process (removing, for example, the ranking and tagging capabilities that are usually present in Web 2.0 arenas) and it becomes clear that hierarchies and power relationships are alive and well, even in a digital public. Large organizations with the most money still tend to be more visible and powerful than individuals or grassroots collectives, and as this dissertation has shown, those organizations still “own” much of the cultural content and genres that shape our culture. This continued
monopolization of popular discourse reflects the unfortunate reality that all participants are not created equal—not even in a Web 2.0 world.

Yet the fact remains that people are perhaps more able to converse on equal footing in Web 2.0 than in other participatory venues, particularly since venues that were traditionally seen as being sites for public debate and conversation (i.e., newspapers) are no longer regarded as serving the needs of citizens the way that Web 2.0 technologies do. As journalist Michael Skoler explains,

Today, people expect to share information, not be fed it. They expect to be listened to when they have knowledge and raise questions. They want news that connects with their lives and interests. They want control over their information. And they want connection—they give their trust to those they engage with—people who talk with them, listen and maintain a relationship. (“Why the News Media Became Irrelevant”).

The values that Skoler describes may at least partially account for why so many people have turned to the social media of Web 2.0, and not traditional media outlets, as places to share their perspectives and communicate experiences; it is, at least to some degree, a digital version of consciousness-raising activism. Individuals ruminate on social issues in blogs and comment on the blogs of others, share links to articles and other resources, capture video footage of natural disasters or other events on video and share this reality on YouTube, and participate in a variety of other activities that draw awareness to oftentimes invisible problems, and in doing so, contribute to a sense of collective responsibility and concern for the world in which they live. And thanks to the publishing capabilities of Web 2.0 platforms, individuals are able to make public their opinions, observations, and experiences, regardless of whether or not an editor has deemed it “newsworthy.”
Further, while the balance of power may remain unequal, Web 2.0 still gives individuals the opportunity to “speak back” to those institutions of power in unprecedented ways—oftentimes resulting in considerable friction, as the previous chapters have repeatedly demonstrated. We must remember, however, that this friction is part of living in a democratic society. As Kembrew McLeod argues, “[d]emocracy should be offensive. It should tolerate uncomfortable ideas—or sounds or images—and if someone is insulted, then they have the right to speak back. It’s true that those with more power can often shout louder; however, no one should be muzzled…when it comes to political speech or social critique, in any medium” (Freedom of Expression 222). Web 2.0 is one of the few arenas where individuals who want to dialogue publicly can still avoid the “muzzle” of control, though increased efforts to regulate the discursive practices of Web 2.0 (such as copyright law, discussed in Chapter 3) threaten to change that fact.

Given this “democratization” of the Web (limited as that democratization may at times be), it is not surprising that Web 2.0 technologies continue to be used as sites of protest and dissent, which is in itself vital to democracy (Ivie 6). While this dissertation has focused on the ways that YouTube serves as a way to “speak back” (through irreverent composing strategies such as parody, through various remix strategies, and through classical approaches like epideictic), I must stress that the relevance of the Web 2.0 phenomenon to protest movements can be seen across platforms. An example of this can be seen with the popular microblogging site, Twitter, a site on which individuals compose updates (commonly referred to as “tweets”) of 140 characters or less, which are then shared with those who choose to “follow” that individual. Twitter may be updated through a Web browser at the Twitter website, but many people choose to download applications that allow them to read and post status updates via mobile devices such
as cellular phones. Twitter became a key vehicle for a mass protest in June 2009, following elections in Iran that many Iranian voters felt were wrought with manipulation and fraudulence. Protestors largely relied on Twitter to communicate updates to each other, particularly since the government had censored or shut down other media. In an article examining the role of Twitter in this movement, Lev Grossman explains the features of Twitter that make it ideal for a mass protest:

It's free, highly mobile, very personal and very quick. It's also built to spread, and fast. Twitterers like to append notes called hashtags…to their tweets, so that they can be grouped and searched for by topic; especially interesting or urgent tweets tend to get picked up and retransmitted by other Twitterers, a practice known as retweeting, or just RT. And Twitter is promiscuous by nature: tweets go out over two networks, the Internet and SMS, the network that cell phones use for text messages, and they can be received and read on practically anything with a screen and a network connection.

Like YouTube and virtually all Web 2.0 technologies, the accessibility and ease of use make Twitter widely appealing for grassroots movements, particularly in an era where there is so much distrust of mainstream media. Part of what made Twitter such a key site in the protest movement in Iran was the fact that it was so difficult for the Iranian government to shut down the way it had shut down other media venues. And while it would be naïve to suggest that Web 2.0 sites are completely free from government control (the Iranian government did manage to block nearly all of the open web proxy servers Twitter users traded in order to get around government Internet restrictions—though it took them about two weeks to do it), the Web 2.0 movement has given citizens across the globe a fighting chance at getting their message heard and building momentum within media venues that are not wrought with the same level of distrust as our
current media conglomerates. In this way, the “Twitter revolution” of the Iran protests is very much relevant to our understanding of how Web 2.0 might revitalize democratic participation in a culture such as ours is currently in the U.S., wherein dissent and protest are often constructed as being unpatriotic and out of place (Ivie 4).

Indeed, as I discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2, our cultural moment is one wrought with considerable economic hardship, strata between classes, distrust of government and media, and communication forms that are strongly marked by class. In such an environment, it is perhaps not surprising that some have predicted the “death” of democracy, or have even proclaimed that it is already dead (Kingsnorth; Farrell). In light of the themes discussed in this dissertation, I am echoing Hauser’s proclamation and suggest that the public is not dead, but rather that it has been remediated. In making that claim, however, I am not trying to present an overly utopian perspective or speak in unchecked hyperbole, as Web 2.0 technologies do not guarantee a reinvigorated democracy any more than they guarantee empowerment. But it is clear that Web 2.0 will continue to shape the ways people learn, work, play, and consume, particularly as mobile technologies proliferate and Web 2.0 applications become more available and accessible to the average person. People are drawn to these technologies. They are participating. And this movement toward individuals participating more freely and fully within their culture, as Jenkins points out, “raise expectation of a freer flow of ideas and content,” resulting in struggles that will ultimately “redefine the face of American popular culture” (18). Given this cultural significance, it is important that scholars continue to find ways to make this struggle visible by theorizing the discursive arenas and practices that constitute those struggles. This dissertation has been an effort to contribute to that body of work.
Summary of Chapter Findings

As I explained in Chapter 1, scholarship in the field of composition studies, as well as related disciplines such as communication studies and media studies, have painted a complex picture of the relationships between new media technologies, literacy, civic participation, and virtually all aspects of public life. Public sphere scholarship has long emphasized the importance of a literate citizenry to democratic processes; yet in a culture where the term “literacy” now includes literacies of print and of the screen, our theories and practices within the academy have not caught up with the requirements for participation in public life. Writing has always been a technology, and new media writing technologies continue to shape the landscape of writing and citizenship just as those cultural institutions also shape and change the technologies of writing. Yet while literacy has been a fundamental part of performing citizenship, the role of media within this scene has become increasingly suspect, as for-profit media outlets are able to disseminate words and images to a large audience that may not be in the best interests of the citizens themselves. As distrust of mass media venues has increased, interest and use in social media has become more widespread, presenting a major challenge to the control of media conglomerates. As a result, mass media outlets and other powerful cultural gatekeepers and officials continue to find ways to capitalize upon Web 2.0. Within these tensions, average people are using new media and the power of social networking technologies to craft messages that question the official discourses of public life and the prescribed roles carved out for citizens within that discourse. It is against this backdrop that I present the composing strategies of subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 offered an examination of one of these composing strategies against the carnivalesque backdrop of YouTube. Specifically, I used the example of the CNN-YouTube
Debates to show this how many individuals who crafted video questions for the event used the rhetorical trope of irreverence—most notably, new media parody—to challenge institutionalized practices and genres. Acknowledging that cultural moments such as ours tend to incite parody as an important discursive form, this chapter showed how individuals deviated from the norms of the debate genre and video question format in order to contest their marginalized status within the political discourse. In doing so, these irreverent discourses serve to place dominant discourse and its underlying ideological attitudes beside itself for critique. In an event that claimed to be a revolutionary moment for democracy, most of the features that make Web 2.0 “democratic” were disabled or minimized, and the agenda for the debate was put solely in the hands of CNN. Further, the irreverent composing strategies of individuals were cited as justification for leaving users out of the agenda-setting process, consistent with narratives that historically characterize citizens as irrational and incompetent. To create a speaking space for themselves within the public discourse surrounding these debates, individuals crafted videos that used rhetorical features common to official political discourses to, among other things, characterize politicians as cyborgs, ask candidates to detail their “personal philosophy of killing,” and ask a serious question about global warming by way of a dubbed-over snowman with animated carrot lips. In taking these approaches, the composers of these videos used irreverence to show that participation in public discourse is not always serious and how the various genres of official discourses are themselves constructed from power relations.

Chapter 3 continued this exploration of the connection between power and genre by exploring the construct of authorship and its role in contemporary conversations about intellectual property and copyright. In this chapter, I explained how, though a true sense of “the author” did not exist until the eighteenth century, authorship has come to represent a solitary
enterprise that is deeply intertwined with notions of static, unchanging texts. Despite the fact
that postmodernists have assaulted these conceptions, these narratives of single authorship and
static textuality have persisted—but are now facing unprecedented threats from the fragmented
nature of digital media. The malleable, shifting, unstable environments of Web 2.0 mean that
authorship now involves being able to manipulate a variety of alphabetic texts, still images,
video clips, and sounds, and Web 2.0 technologies make it easier for average people to
appropriate and reuse existing content. This tendency toward appropriation has given way to
many lawsuits over who “owns” the right to use creative works, despite the fact that historically
copyright was designed as an incentive for creators to produce more works that would become
part of the commons. In response, many individuals employ strategies of remix that challenge
many of our notions of authorship and what constitutes textuality. Whether collecting several
texts and redistributing them as a single work, recutting and blending highly recognizable
footage to create an oppositional message, or “mashing” disparate tracks to erase the binaries
between genre and medium, remix continues to emerge as one of the key composing strategies in
contemporary culture. One of the appeals of this strategy, as we saw, was the way that remix
culture fosters a sense of community by encouraging the creation and public sharing of remixed
texts.

The role of community of Web 2.0 environments is a theme further explored in Chapter
4, which focused on the classical rhetorical genre of *epideictic* rhetoric. Specifically, this chapter
showed how Web 2.0 spaces like YouTube encourage a remediated form of epideictic rhetoric
through its emphasis on display and spectatorship. With the spectacle of video being an ideal
medium for amplifying the shared values of a community, it is not surprising that many turn to
sites like YouTube to share in epideictic displays, particularly during times of crisis (as the
“Virginia Tech” tributes showed). Additionally, sites like YouTube offer individuals an opportunity to bring their private experiences into public view, which holds powerful pedagogical benefits (as the “In My Language” video showed). In a culture where epideictic approaches are often used to shape everything from our narratives of nation to our consuming habits, mass media are in a unique position to amplify values in order to serve their own marketing interests. Thus, vernacular epideictic displays on sites like YouTube have the potential to provide counter narratives that articulate shared community values that may be in opposition to dominant discourses, and which may incite reflection leading to actions that are subversive.

Remediation as Reform

In light of the composing strategies discussed in these chapters, and in light of the ways that Web 2.0 continues to impact a variety of facets of contemporary life, I am returning again to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of remediation, which has been central to much of my analysis in this dissertation. Since remediation is not limited to writing technologies (Bolter 24-25), I am arguing that the mutually shaping process of remediation also applies to the rhetorical tradition and composition pedagogy. If we take the “remediation as reform” (Bolter and Grusin 56, emphasis mine) concept and apply it to rhetorical theory and practice, new possibilities emerge for understanding how material and conceptual realities can both change and stay the same. Bolter and Grusin teach us that older media are never entirely effaced by new media in this process—the process is not one of displacement but instead is a “co-evolution and uneasy co-existence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media industries, forms, and practices” (Burgess and Green 14). Similarly, I am arguing that while the discursive practices of Web 2.0 may shape and define the future of public discourse and democratic participation, they do so by “borrowing and reorganizing the characteristics” of our theoretical and pedagogical traditions in an effort to
“reform its cultural space” (Bolter 23). And with the strong ties that these traditions have to writing pedagogy and civic discourse, I argue that the themes discussed in this dissertation may point toward a remediation of the ways in which we train our students to become literate citizens, not to mention the way we conceptualize democratic participation itself.

Remediating Theory

In *Vernacular Voices*, Gerard Hauser argues that the ‘public’ is not dead, but that we as scholars are looking for it in the wrong places with inadequate conceptual lenses (30). These inadequate conceptual lenses not only impede our ability to “see” democratic participation but also our ability to understand the ways that people shape these publics through communication practices. As Gunther Kress notes, “one of our major problems is not just change itself, but the fact that we are forced to confront this world of change with theories which were shaped to account for a world of stability. There is an urgent need for theoretical accounts that tell us how to understand communication in periods of instability” (11). A starting point to understanding communication in a world of instability such as ours would be to confront our definitions of what constitutes rhetorical practice and the extent to which those practices are connected to citizenship and public participation. Instead of privileging idealized forms of rhetoric, our conceptual lenses must reflect actual, changing social practices by examining and valuing informal, vernacular discourses. To do so is to return to the civic roots of the rhetorical tradition, revised to account for the complexity of postmodern society.

One step toward this remediation of theory is to continue developing rhetorical concepts and frameworks to account for “remix” culture. In light of what this dissertation has shown about the problematic constructs of authorship and textuality, as well as the connections between genre appropriation, literacy, and political engagement, it is clear that rhetorical practice in a Web 2.0
world involves texts that are “inspired or incited by existing media content” (Jenkins 258). Since these practices also have deep connections to protest and resistance, rhetorical theories that account for the “remixability” of texts and follow the trajectory of creative material are needed to deepen the rhetorical canon. To examine the “rhetorical velocity” (DeVoss and Ridolfo) of texts is to recognize appropriation and remix as a legitimate rhetorical tactic that holds significant ramifications for civic participation.

Additionally, we must continue examining the connection between mode and medium in the rhetorical situation, with attention to the ways in which the messages are delivered shape the rhetorical message itself. Scholars like Danielle DeVoss and Jim Ridolfo, as well as Kathleen Blake Yancey, are among the scholars who have recently noted that the rhetorical canon of delivery is going to continue growing in importance in a digital age. As the line between oral, spoken rhetorics and written discourse blurs with the proliferation of new media, scholars and teachers will need to continue to get a sense for the shape of composition studies as a discipline. As Yancey notes, scholars currently struggle in the reality that “we don’t seem to have a disciplinary consensus about where our focus belongs: on the print side; in screen and print contexts both; in the passage between; or in all of the above” (6). This tension is also relevant to historical debates about the relationship between orality and literacy and the extent to which the technology of writing systems, including new media writing systems, contribute to the very “commodification of knowledge” (Ong 131) that Web 2.0 culture purports to resist. On one hand, the “orality” of many new media writing strategies makes it possible for individuals to participate in discourses they are often left out of—the “In My Language” video, for example, demonstrated a woman with autism bringing her private knowledge into public view in order to formulate a critique about the shared linguistic values of contemporary society. But those “oral”
narratives also are presented by way of a permanent (theoretically, at least) artifact that can be visited repeatedly and exchanged as a commodity, even through the process of remix. We must find concepts and frameworks that allow us to live in the tension between orality and materiality as we determine the role of composition studies in defining that landscape.

Web 2.0 technologies have also given new dimension to the notion of a “public” and what *counts* as public discursive practice, and these chapters have shown that many people use Web 2.0 as a means for participating in conversations from which they are often ignored or excluded. But in our efforts to illuminate these discourses and bring them into our rhetorical theories, we must also be careful to attend to the issues of access that still remain. Jenkins notes here that the “digital divide” or “participation gap” discussion must look at “cultural factors that diminish the likelihood that different groups will participate” (258). The simple reality is that “some groups not only feel more confidence in engaging with new technologies but also some groups seem more comfortable going public with their views about culture” (258). Jean Burgess prefers the term “digital inclusion” to illustrate how the participation gap involves “a complex ecosystem of privilege, access, and participation” (14). Whatever terminology we adopt, the fact remains that the Web, ubiquitous as it may seem, is an arena from which many populations remain systematically excluded.

In light of these cultural challenges to democratizing the Web, our rhetorical theories must account for voices that are left out of the conversation and must interrogate the institutional and systematic frameworks that contribute to the privileging of some voices over others. It is on this point that cultural studies frameworks should continue to be of interest to scholars in rhetoric and composition, as cultural studies is critically engaged with the social underpinnings of cultural experiences of everyday life (During 1). For the purposes of this dissertation, I have used
articulation theory as a means of exploring “non-necessary connections that can create structural unities among linguistic and historical conditions” (Makus 496). By continuing to attend to the cultural factors underscoring the discursive practices of Web 2.0, scholars in rhetoric can build rhetorical theory that acknowledges the “specific connections between ideological elements and social, political, economic, and technological practices and structures” (496). There is no such thing as a neutral text, and the texts of Web 2.0 should be approached as cultural artifacts so that we might better understand the world in which we live through the texts we produce, just as we understand the texts we produce by attending to the characteristics of the world in which we live.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that these are the only ways that Web 2.0 presents theoretical and conceptual challenges. My point here is that, as scholars continue to explore the relationship between technologies, rhetoric, and democracy, we will need to revise our notions of what constitutes textuality and authorship, the delivery mechanisms and genres that continue to emerge as the most powerful rhetorical strategies of contemporary life, and the cultural factors that may systematically exclude certain populations from participation in these discursive arenas.

**Remediating Pedagogy**

To revise and reform our rhetorical theories is to also remediate our approach to writing instruction, which begins with the ongoing challenge of defining “literacy” in a Web 2.0 world. While quite a bit of work has been done to show how literacy involves being able to make meaning across a variety of cultural practices, we still have more work to do in terms of showing how those literacies and participation in public life are inextricably linked. As Jenkins notes, “the challenge is not simply being able to read and write, but being able to participate in the deliberations over what issues matter, what knowledge counts, and what ways of knowing command authority and respect” (258-259). To have a voice in Web 2.0 culture, participants
must be able not only to use the technologies; they must be able to identify issues that impact their communities and to be able to “speak back” to those issues in the genres and media that carry the most strength in our multimodal society, while maintaining the vernacular spirit of a democratic public.

With this in mind, we must recognize as composition instructors not only that the “life span” (Selfe, “Students Who Teach Us” 49-51) of print-only literacy has ended, but also that we can no longer continue to teach literacy in a way that only matters inside the walls of the classroom. To make our classes relevant to students outside of the academy, we must help students to become aware of the social codes of the communities they will encounter and the role that literacy plays within those communities. The events and genres discussed in this dissertation are just a few examples of how new media literacies may impact students’ opportunities for civic engagement. In an age of vlogs, podcasts, tweets, RSS feeds, and text messages, students will continue to have many opportunities to write within a whole host of discourse communities. But writing effectively in those communities and with those media involves being able to negotiate social codes, and students must learn those social codes at the same time that they are given frameworks to critique the status quo, as well.

The critical component of literacy instruction is key, since multimodal literacies are no more neutral than the print-only literacies that preceded them. Technology constitutes not a neutral idea or set of items, but is instead “an expression of continuously changing social practices” (Gruber 164) and literacies are similarly “produced by, and practiced in, particular social and historical contexts” (Burgess and Green 71). To give students opportunities to explore the importance of cultural context to literacy is a stepping stone toward also acknowledging that new media literacy is “not a property of individuals…but a system that both enables and shapes
participation” (72). By helping students to be literate across media and across genres, we are also
giving them an opportunity to critique the spaces and communities that shape those discursive
practices. In the case of epideictic rhetorics discussed in Chapter 4, for example, students may
have an opportunity to critique the way epideictic is used in popular culture to articulate shared
values within a community—a skill that would also translate to their assessment of a variety of
rhetorical practices in other contexts. Literacy in a site like YouTube, as Burgess and Green
argue, involves “being able to comprehend the way YouTube works as a set of technologies and
as a social network” as much as it involves being able to create and consume content (72). Thus,
by encouraging students to develop multimodal literacies that include a literacy of social codes in
online spaces, we are also encouraging them to think critically about the spaces they occupy,
both on and offline, and the values and narratives that shape their communities.

In short, teachers of writing must find ways to accommodate Web 2.0 in their own
teaching practices. This does not mean that instructors must abandon what they have
traditionally valued in writing instruction. In fact, the new media texts I’ve discussed in this
chapter speak to many abilities and concepts that we already value in composition instruction—
among them, notions of audience, purpose, and available means. Further, Web 2.0 underscores
the reality that writing is a fundamentally social endeavor and that texts do not exist in isolation.
Writing in new media, as in any medium, involves a process, and drawing attention to new
media texts may help to make that process of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
more visible to students who sometimes still operate under the misconception that the “author”
(particularly in the “writer-writes-alone” model discussed in Chapter 3) is able to write a work of
genius in a single sitting, without revision and without feedback. Further, concepts like remix
may provide a useful bridge for helping students to understand writing skills they often struggle
with, such as source synthesis, or the ability to draw from a variety of sources in support of a new, original idea. To shun the composing practices of Web 2.0, then, is to miss out on an opportunity to use culturally relevant tools and artifacts to support many of our existing learning goals.

Yet there are other, more radical implications that Web 2.0 has for the teaching of writing—implications that must be addressed as we continue to develop best practices for composition instruction. For starters, we need to rethink our approaches to the learning environment (both material and conceptual) to accommodate Web 2.0 ways of knowing and composing. In a Web 2.0 world, sharing and remixing are considered legitimate practices; in higher education, by contrast, we tend to balk at these approaches, operating under an assumption that engaging in such practices negates a student’s ability to produce “original” work. As writing instructors, how do we reconcile a remixed new media work like the “Alice” video discussed in Chapter 3 with our existing policies about what constitutes original student work? Instead of the “unauthorized collaboration is cheating” (Jenkins 259) approach, we might find ways to draw from Web 2.0 principles and use those principles to support our learning agendas to encourage students not just to be isolated learners, but to be members of a learning community. And given the continued evolution of new media and the remediation of genres discussed throughout this dissertation, we cannot be satisfied with simply encouraging students to “plug” Web 2.0 into existing academic genres and procedures. We must develop new questions, frameworks, and assessment tools to account for new ways of composing. Ultimately, to value the practices that students bring with them to the classroom and to accommodate vernacular ways of composing is to visualize a model of composition instruction that transcends
notions of the composition classroom as being merely a vehicle for social conformity and adherence to the status quo (Redd 74).

Instead, as Suzanne Webb describes in “Remix Repository,” use of Web 2.0 in the writing classroom helps students to become autonomous thinkers and members of a writing public. To see our students as part of a writing public is key, particularly in light of the fact that much of today’s learning about literacy, language, and culture takes place outside of school. While some may bemoan Web 2.0 technologies and the perceived negative impact they have on students’ literacy practices, research shows that students of the current generation are producing more text than ever before. As DeVoss and Ridolfo argue, students in the Web 2.0 generation are far from illiterate. They are texting, commenting, updating, tagging, remixing, and sharing work across multiple spaces. Yet their composition classrooms do not help them to develop frameworks for approaching and critiquing those literacy practices and the ways that those literacies impact their opportunities for participation in their lives outside of school. So, while the roots of the rhetorical tradition are intertwined with the roots of civic discourse and citizenship, the way we teach writing and literacy seems largely removed from those public exigencies. Web 2.0 may offer a return to participatory culture and a pedagogy that is needed to sustain a vibrant democratic culture—in other words, to “extend the usefulness of composition studies in a changing world” (Selfe, “Toward New Media Texts” 72).

Yet I must return to the cautions against adopting an overly utopian view of Web 2.0 technologies, particularly as they relate to pedagogy, since many access issues remain. As Wysocki notes in the Introduction to Writing New Media, these issues of access and participation insofar as they intersect with identity politics have been an important topic of discussion since teachers first began integrating computer mediated instruction into their classrooms. Wysocki
notes how teachers of writing in the 1980s noticed that students who rarely spoke during class discussion were more likely to participate in discussions that we held on electronic discussion boards, but how those same writers revealed certain aspects of their identity (7). In doing so, these students found that they “could be just as easily silenced online as off—because online discussion were just as much entwined with other social and cultural practices as writing with pen and paper” (7). Similarly, she notes how the presence of a “safe space” in digital environments does nothing to guarantee that a given population will use that space (8). Tulley and Blair also point out that technology itself does not guarantee empowerment of its users: “Rather, it is the pedagogy enacted within an electronic environment that determines the extent to which it is empowering for students, particularly students whose gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation may have impacted their access and thus their attitude toward computers both inside and outside the classroom” (55). For these reasons, teachers who incorporate Web 2.0 into their courses must do so under the guidance of theoretical frameworks—theoretical frameworks that must continue to be developed with an eye toward advancing students’ rhetorical competency and ability to participate more fully in the most vibrant discursive arenas of contemporary life. But as the access issues described above remain, as well as others (including reports that show that social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are largely divided by social markers such as race and class [Sydell]), teachers of writing must also be part of the critical effort that questions just how empowering a Web 2.0 pedagogy might be. This “cyborg pedagogy” acknowledges our role as teacher-activists and foregrounds the complex relationship between” individuals, technologies, and their shared contexts all at once to promote equity and diversity” (212). Above all, the goal of writing instruction should always be the empowerment
of students through literacy. And, as this dissertation has shown, literacy in a Web 2.0 world involves new media texts and the ability to read, write, and share across a variety of platforms.

Curricular issues are certainly paramount, but administrators will also need to think about issues of infrastructure and, to borrow from Devoss, Cushman and Grabill, the “when” of new media writing. Despite our general scholarly consensus that knowledge is something that is constructed and shared socially, little has changed about the way we instruct our students—right down to the design of our classrooms. As Paul Bodmer notes, the rows of student desks facing a wall with an instructional focal point reinforce the model of knowledge-as-commodity, with all-knowing professors being responsible for constructing the knowledge outside of the classroom and then bringing it into the classroom to dispense to the students (115-116). To remediate pedagogy and administration is to work against this “banking concept” of education (Freire 72) and to position our students as agents in their own learning. To remediate pedagogy and administration is also to think about how we train our writing instructors and prepare them to incorporate work with Web 2.0 in new media into their classrooms, particularly when they themselves are not comfortable with new media. Writing instructors—both inexperienced and experienced—will need continued heuristics, resources, and support to help guide their instruction and their assessment of multimodal texts. These and other pedagogical issues speak to the “digital imperative” of composition in the 21st Century and illustrate the pressing need for writing teachers to remediate old pedagogical models that emphasize “the civic importance of education, the cultural and social imperative of ‘the now,’ and the ‘cultural software’ that engages students in the interactivity, collaboration, ownership, authority, and malleability of texts” (Clark 27). We must bring composition studies into the world of Web 2.0, for the benefits of our students and for the sustainability of our field.
Practicing What We Preach: Web 2.0 and the Public Intellectual

In addition to the theoretical and pedagogical remediations described above, Web 2.0 provides an unprecedented opportunity for scholars and teachers to work as public intellectuals. Many scholars are turning to Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs to offer “intelligent commentary on social and cultural issues of common concern” (Freese 45). Such a movement would help to break down conceptions that often situate scholarly work in the “ivory tower” of the academe, with little to no connection or relevance to the “real” world. However, when academics maintain public blogs, Facebook profiles, and Twitter feeds, the discourse of ideas suddenly seems more accessible to both other colleagues and to the general public. The same is true for pedagogy, as YouTube offers the capacity for instructors to upload complete courses and lectures for public viewing. If our goal is truly to make the work we do and the knowledge we create public for the greater good, then Web 2.0 provides an opportunity for us to be members of the larger community and to have our research and teaching benefit—and be held accountable by—the people we purport to serve.

Along a similar vein, I argue that we have a responsibility to disseminate our work in digital formats, precisely because the work in those formats is more easily shared and recirculated. While some traditionalists may frown at the prospect of sharing their scholarly work on the Web, I must stress here that ignoring digital publishing opportunities is to greatly limit the potential audience for the work. People are increasingly turning to digital publishing venues for sources of information, and it is important that scholars be part of this conversation if we are to help keep the information in those spaces accurate and take part in collaboratively growing the knowledge of our culture. Furthermore, many traditional outlets for books and articles simply can’t keep up with the speed of Web 2.0. As a rudimentary illustration of this, consider the
following: My keyword search for “Web 2.0” on Amazon retrieved 1,261 books, most of which offered advice to a general audience on how to use Web 2.0 for a variety of professional and social purposes. A similar search via Google books resulted in 4,070 titles, most of which offered at least a limited preview of the text. By contrast, a search in my home institution’s library holdings revealed 230 books, and a search for scholarly articles in the Academic Search Premiere database resulted in less than 1,000 hits. Recognizing the limitations to drawing too many conclusions from these findings, the point here is that the scholarly community is not keeping up with the discursive practices, interests, and exigencies that drive participation and knowledge-production outside of the academy. Digital publication is one way to bridge this gap.

*Confronting the Culture of Fear*

While I have suggested several ways in which the vernacular rhetorics of Web 2.0 might suggest some new trajectories for composition theory and pedagogy, there are also many issues related to Web 2.0 that must be further investigated. One lingering concern, for example, is the “Big Brother” complex associated with the Web. Many fear that the popularity of Web 2.0 is setting the groundwork for a global panopticon which may result in even more institutional control, as every movement is being recorded and our buying, posting, tagging, and uploading habits are all recorded. We must continue to interrogate the extent to which our well-intentioned efforts to use Web 2.0 as a site of empowerment might actually be contributing to our own subjection.

Several years ago, for example, one blogger predicted a “participatory panopticon,” or a “bottom-up version of the constantly watched society” (Cascio). Since that time, mobile technology has further proliferated, with more people carrying cellular phones and mobile devices that are equipped with a variety of recording capabilities to not only take photos and
videos, but also GPS capabilities that track location and movement. Yet some argue that Web 2.0 and mobile technologies have subverted the rules even in surveillance culture, calling it “sousveillance” culture—the idea being that the “watching” comes from below instead of from above (Cascio). YouTube users, for example, not only monitor the activities of public figures and expose their foibles and abuses; they also watch each other and keep each other accountable, investigating “authenticity” of videos and exposing fakes and frauds. Perhaps more notably, Web 2.0 and the proliferation of mobile technology may be to thank for exposing such travesties as the Abu Ghraib scandal, further supporting the case for “sousveillance” culture. Yet much remains to be critiqued about the extent to which we trade privacy for convenience (Oppmann), particularly if we are to think of Web 2.0 as a place that is safe for the commons and an ideal site of resistance.

These types of issues must be addressed and acknowledged responsibly, particularly as community anxieties are often exploited in order to discipline certain groups and restrict their participation in certain ways. While sharing some of my research findings with undergraduates as I’ve been visiting institutions during my job search, I have been surprised at the level of distrust and apprehension that many of the students I spoke with (particularly young women) expressed toward social networking sites like Facebook. One graduating senior, for example, complained that once teachers started using Facebook for classroom activities and employers started using Facebook as a means for “checking up” on potential hires, she and many of her peers began restricting access to their profiles or even abandoning the site altogether. She noted during our conversation that she felt that she had little control over her digital identity, particularly with others being able to upload and tag photos of her that could be viewed publicly.
While this expression of apprehension in itself was not surprising to me, given the culture of fear that often surrounds young women on the web (see Tulley and Blair), what did surprise me was the disconnect between what this young woman was expressing to me in contrast with what organizations like Pew Internet Research & American Life are reporting about young people’s use and attitude toward social media. A recent report from Pew suggested that, as of September 2009, 73% of all teens use social media (Lenhart, Slide 17). Similarly, a recent Boston Globe article suggests that young people are turning to video activism as a means of communicating “more powerful statements” (Aucoin) than what is available to them in print-based venues. More research must be done to account for the seemed disconnect between what research findings and news reports are saying about young people and the Web and the ways that those young people are perceiving themselves, particularly if we are to make sense of how much the distrust of online spaces is perpetuated by “media panic,” or news stories that emphasize links between youth, violence, risk, and media discourse (Burgess and Green 19).

Conclusion

But even as the access issues and surveillance issues persist, Web 2.0 still presents attractive potential for reinvigorating a more democratic discursive arena, particularly when viewed from a perspective—like Hauser’s vernacular-rhetorical model—that places the communication of publics at the center of democratic processes. To privilege the everyday voices of those who wish to participate in public discussion of matters of collective importance, and to do so via media like video that offer greater immediacy and transparency, is to change the way that publics are portrayed and the ways that individuals and groups can interact with those representations. This relationship would be in marked contrast to that experienced between mass media and the public, as the public are typically portrayed in major media outlets as “an abstract
representation whose needs, thoughts, and responses cannot interact with it, question its reasoning, or expect it to respond to our own reasoning….Although we supposedly are included in this picture, we seldom experience it as ‘us’ and usually narrate it as ‘them’” (Hauser 5). To embrace and value Web 2.0 in our rhetorical practices and training would be a return to what Hauser sees as a democratic tradition wherein individuals recognize “participatory venues in which public matters would receive the attention of those whose interests were at stake” (5).

Ultimately, this dissertation shows that participation in public life takes many forms, and in a Web 2.0 world, those forms continue to evolve and challenge our understandings about rhetoric, literacy, and democracy. Web 2.0 discourse is irreverent; it is malleable; it is spectacular; and it is oftentimes remarkably critical. These features of vernacular discourses of sites like YouTube force us to extend our conceptions of citizen discourses to include things like parody and remix and to think about the ways in which communities and public opinion are articulated through new media discourses. In this landscape, a model of citizenship is emerging in which consuming practices are part of the creative exigencies citizens experience. These “citizen-consumers” give vernacular narratives of experience that are simultaneously “bound up with commercial popular media” so that “consumption’ is a source of value-creation, and not only its destination” (Burgess and Green 48).

In the carnivalesque environment of Web 2.0, what masquerades as mere gratuitous display or playfulness may actually perform important cultural functions by revealing hierarchies and disrupting power relationships through vernacular displays. To value these discourses is to acknowledge the significance and cultural import of what Jean Burgess calls “vernacular creativity,” or the “everyday practices of material and symbolic creativity…that both predate digital culture and are remediated by it in particular ways” (iii). To value these discourses is to
believe that everyday people have a say in what matters in the world around them. To value these discourses is to believe, however tentatively, that the promise of democracy is not dead. It is digital.
REFERENCES


Biressi, Anita. “‘Above the Below’: Body Trauma as Spectacle in Social/Media Space.”


Killoran, John B. “@ Home among the .coms: Virtual Rhetoric in the Agora of the Web.” In *Alternative Rhetorics: Challenges of the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Laura Gray-


Redd, Teresa. “Keepin’ It Real: Delivering College Composition at an HBCU.” In Yancey. 72-88. Print.


