PAYING ATTENTION TO THE ALIEN:
REVALUATING COMPOSITION STUDIES' CONSTRUCTION OF
HUMAN AGENCY IN LIGHT OF SECRET GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE

David Charles Maynard

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Findlay’s
College of Liberal Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF RHETORIC AND WRITING

May 2017

Approved by:

Christine Denecker, PhD
Chair, Thesis Committee

Ronald Tulley, PhD
Committee Member

Megan Adams, PhD
Committee Member

Christine Tulley, PhD
Director, Masters of Rhetoric and Writing Program
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ABSTRACT

Since the advent of digital composing methods, scholars of first-year writing have produced research exploring the implications of digital writing instruction for writing professionals and students. However, despite extensive consideration of how digital writing instruction may perpetuate societal inequalities, little scholarship has explored how the government’s digital surveillance of citizens may jeopardize writing studies’ understanding of human agency and its mission to preserve student agency even as students interact with increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces. In the following thesis, I address this gap by examining available information regarding the NSA’s surveillance of web users and the role web companies such as Microsoft play in such surveillance. Furthermore, I review composition studies scholarship that examines the implications of the digital interface for writing instruction, scholarship that has recently grown concerned with the potential for the government to exploit networked digital interfaces as a means of surveilling users. I suggest that Cynthia Selfe’s argument to writing professionals to pay attention to their technology use reinscribes a democratic humanist vision of agency. Furthermore, I suggest that the correlation of paying attention with increased agency limits scholars’ understanding of the insidious, secretive nature of government surveillance as an alien object that resists understanding. Ultimately, I present alien phenomenology as an alternative theoretical lens through which scholars may pay attention to government surveillance without assuming that doing so will increase the agency of writing professionals or students. Finally, I suggest that by paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology, scholars may consider the possibility that agency is not a sustainable category as writing professionals and students engage with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.
This project is dedicated to Miss Maggie.

Thank you for your patience and support, and for your frequent reminders that

a man cannot live on coffee, alone.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any extended intellectual project, this thesis has undergone many permutations, and I have been fortunate to receive exceptional support at key points along the way. Foremost, this thesis would not have been possible without the sustained engagement of my project Chair, Dr. Christine Denecker. While Dr. Denecker’s contributions are too numerous to list, the greatest has been her ability to lead through example. Whenever I began to feel overwhelmed by an intimidating work load (one that included teaching, tutoring and coursework, to say nothing of researching and composing this thesis), I would consider the fact that Dr. Denecker was always doing more. It was this thought that motivated me to push past my occasional exhaustion and focus on the work, a valuable skill. Likewise, Dr. Ronald Tulley has played an invaluable role in shaping this project through his ongoing support and advice over the past two years. As one who maintains multiple roles (Dean, professor and thesis advisor), Dr. Tulley has continually inspired me to remain passionate, not just in the pursuit of knowledge, but in the sharing of that knowledge with multiple audiences. Furthermore, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Megan Adams, who, as the final member of my thesis committee, has provided me with valuable insight into how I might critically engage with scholarship while also acknowledging the invaluable contributions made by the writing scholars being considered. I must also thank Dr. Sarah Fedirka for her engagement during the early stages of this project. Dr. Fedirka’s encouragement and detailed suggestions helped me to balance the sometimes difficult task of creating a research project that appeals to multiple discourse communities, one being the Masters of Rhetoric and Writing program and the other being the larger scholarly community of composition studies. Lastly, I thank Dr. Elkie Burnside for providing valuable suggestions and insight at the beginning of this project.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

It is my hope that by paying some attention to technology, we may become better humanists . . . (161)

-- Cynthia Selfe,
Technology and Literacy in the Twentieth Century: The Importance of Paying Attention

Nearly fifteen years after Selfe’s work, I ask how educators are continuing to pay attention to technology in ways that explore digital surveillance and privacy in connection with writing infrastructures.

-- Estee Beck,
“Writing Educator Responsibilities for Discussing the History and Practice of Surveillance [sic] & Privacy in Writing Classrooms

Our job is to go where everyone has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger. (34)

-- Ian Bogost,
Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing

In recent years, there has been a surge of scholarship exploring the impact of technological innovation in the college writing classroom. In light of the ever-increasing use of new media technologies to teach and compose texts, scholars are concerned with how new technologies and composing processes may necessitate a reevaluation of how the field of writing studies defines the writing process. In particular, new media scholarship has given significant attention to how digital technologies oblige the field to reevaluate traditional notions of authorship and the rhetorical situation, with texts being composed through a complex interface in which the creative agent is no longer one, but many, and the processes by which texts are produced and disseminated are complex (Brooke; Dobrin; Eyman; Haraway; Hayles; Reid; Rice; Takayoshi & Selfe). Furthermore, new media’s growing presence in the writing classroom has led digital writing scholars to interrogate the implications of technology use in higher education,
especially in regards to how techno-literacy practices may disadvantage certain student populations based on cultural background, race and/or ethnicity (Chambers), as well as disability and access to the equipment needed to make full use of higher education’s often praised new media initiatives (Nielsen). However, despite the rich conversation that surrounds the use of new media in college writing, not all consequences of new media use are being explored in equal depth.

There is a remarkable lack of scholarly attention in writing studies on the implications of government surveillance\(^1\) for institutional and student use of digital learning and composing resources, and there has been little discussion that focuses on the National Security Agency’s (NSA) utilization of major internet companies like Microsoft to engage in the surveillance of citizens and the ways in which such surveillance practices might lead writing studies professionals to reevaluate the role of digital learning technologies in the writing classroom (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald, et al.; Greenwald and MacAskill). To be sure, the secretive nature of government surveillance complicates any attempt at educating oneself and others about the mechanisms through which such surveillance occurs. However, by exploring the “event horizon” of the black hole that is government surveillance, composition studies scholars of the digital may develop a greater appreciation for how insidious such surveillance is\(^2\) as it proliferates throughout the networked digital interface (Bogost 63).

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this thesis, the term digital surveillance is used to refer to practices through which the digital data individuals produce is monitored, often without users’ knowledge or consent. Occasionally, the term surveillance is used to refer to consensual surveillance, such as that which exists between a teacher and student or a web company and customer. However, even seemingly consensual surveillance practices may be deemed problematic when evaluated within a larger context of secrecy and exploitation, as Chapter II’s review of digital writing scholarship suggests.

\(^2\) As this thesis demonstrates, the insidious nature of government surveillance is due, at least in part, to the ease with which web technology allows government agencies such as the NSA to collect user data. This is not to suggest that government surveillance did not exist in other non-digital forms previously, but that, just as networked digital technologies provide citizens with an unprecedented ability to produce data, the digital interface provides the government with equally unprecedented means for covertly observing and collecting that data.
Part One: The State of the Surveillance State

On June 7, 2013, The Washington Post and The Guardian newspapers reported that the United States federal government engages in surveillance practices in which it collects and monitors web users’ digital data (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill). The leak of top secret government documents revealed that the National Security Agency collects this data from the servers of major U.S. internet companies such as Microsoft, Apple, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, Skype and YouTube (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill). The process by which the NSA gathers this information is known as the PRISM program (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill). According to an investigation conducted by Washington Post reporters, Barton Gellman and Laura Poitras, while “procedures [have been put] in place to minimize collection of ‘U.S. persons’ data without a warrant,” the great amount of secrecy surrounding such procedures raises doubts regarding their efficacy (Gellman and Poitras). In the months following Edward Snowden’s disclosure of top-secret presentation slides that outline the massive surveillance operation being conducted by the NSA under the name of PRISM, intense debate erupted in the United States over the possibility that the government is unlawfully invading citizens’ privacy (Gellman et al.).

In their July 31, 2013 testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Deputy Legal Director Jameel Jaffer and the Director of the ACLU’s Washington Legislative Office, Laura Murphy, express significant doubt that the NSA, operating through the PRISM program, is not targeting U.S. citizens’ data and, instead, collects data solely from foreign targets.

Under this program, labeled “PRISM” in NSA documents, the government collects emails, audio and video chats, photographs, and other internet traffic from nine major
service providers—Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, PalTalk, AOL, Skype, YouTube, and Apple. . . . The Director of National Intelligence has acknowledged the existence of the PRISM program but stated that it involves surveillance of foreigners outside the United States. This is misleading. The PRISM program involves the collection of Americans’ communications, both international and domestic, and . . . the program is unconstitutional. (8)

Jaffer and Murphy’s statements are significant for two reasons. In addition to drawing attention to the threat that PRISM may pose to U.S. citizens’ privacy, Jaffer and Murphy draw attention to the double-bind that top secret government surveillance presents to citizens: in addition to potentially being subjected to surveillance, one cannot begin to combat said surveillance because the mechanisms through which it occurs are largely opaque due to the wall of secrecy surrounding them. Given the secretive nature of this surveillance and the fact that much of the most condemning evidence pertaining to it is been derived from documents illegally leaked by Edward Snowden, it is difficult not only to protect oneself from surveillance practices but to even become aware of how these practices function, a dilemma that makes it difficult to debate government surveillance practices in a meaningful, open manner. However, despite this lack of transparency, debate has continued to grow surrounding issues of secrecy and government surveillance and the potential for these practices to threaten United States citizens’ constitutional protections.

One of the key points of criticism of government surveillance operations such as the PRISM program is that they violate U.S. citizens’ rights under the Constitution. One such right is one’s protection from unlawful search and seizure, which is outlined in the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and
effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized” (“The Bill of Rights”). The Fourth Amendment promises U.S. citizens that they and their property will be protected and not violated without due cause. If due cause is found, then the government is legally obligated to identify specific locations and specific targets for the search and obtaining of a citizen’s person or property. The wording of the Fourth Amendment indicates that it is designed to protect citizens from blanket invasions of body, property and, by extension, privacy. However, as Jaffer and Murphy explain in their testimony to the Senate, digital surveillance operations such as PRISM do not always specify either the target of surveillance or the elements of digital identity that will be tracked and/or collected:

The target [of government surveillance] could be a human rights activist, a media organization, a geographic region, or even a country. The government must assure the FISA Court that the targets are non-U.S. persons overseas, but in allowing the executive to target such persons overseas, Section 702 allows it to monitor communications between those targets and U.S. persons inside the United States. Moreover, because the FISA Amendments Act does not require the government to identify the specific targets and facilities to be surveilled, it permits the acquisition of these communications _en masse_. A single order may be used to justify the surveillance of communications implicating thousands or even millions of U.S. citizens and residents. (11) According to Jaffer and Murphy, even though PRISM ostensibly targets non-U.S. citizens located outside the United States, the program enables the NSA to collect digital data that has been created by U.S. citizens because all digital exchanges between U.S. citizens and non-U.S.
citizens located abroad are legally accessible. As Jaffer and Murphy note, the piece of legislation that legalizes this data collection is Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Amendments Act of 2008 (11). A more extensive understanding of this Act and how it serves as a legal framework for the NSA’s PRISM program is necessary in order to appreciate the potential threat such surveillance poses to U.S. citizens, as well as to understand why PRISM has generated so much debate during the almost four years since Edward Snowden’s 2013 leaks.

Despite its reassuring title, “Sec. 702. Procedures for Targeting Certain Persons Outside the United States Other than United States Persons” is the portion of FISA that enables the existence of PRISM (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438), the name given to the program through which the federal government collects digital information produced by web users, many of whom are U.S. citizens, and whose existence is documented through Snowden’s aforementioned leaks to The Guardian and The Washington Post (Jaffer and Murphy 8). Section 702 states that “the Attorney General and the Director of National Intelligence may authorize jointly, for a period of up to 1 year . . . , the targeting of persons reasonably believed to be located outside the United States to acquire foreign intelligence information” (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438). As Jaffer and Murphy suggest in their 2013 testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, the wording of Section 702 is ambiguous in terms of how it defines the conditions under which digital data is collected (10). For instance, though the Act claims to only target “persons reasonably believed to be located outside the United States,” the use of the term “reasonably” leaves the conditions required for such a determination to be made uncertain (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438). Furthermore, the term “foreign intelligence information” is also ambiguous in that no specific criteria are established that explain what qualifies as foreign intelligence (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438).
Indeed, according to Jaffer and Murphy, “The phrase ‘foreign intelligence information’ is defined broadly to include, among other things, all information concerning terrorism, national security, and foreign affairs . . .” (10).

Upon closer scrutiny of Section 702, other issues begin to arise that suggest a threat to U.S. citizens’ privacy under the Fourth Amendment. For instance, while Section 702 prohibits government agencies from using the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 to “intentionally acquire any communication as to which the sender and all intended recipients are known at the time of acquisition to be located in the United States,” it clearly allows such agencies to collect digital communications in which at least one sender or recipient is located on foreign soil (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438). Even though Section 702 states that such surveillance practices will “be conducted in a manner consistent with the fourth amendment to the Constitution of the United States,” the preceding set of permissions clearly risks violating that very amendment (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438). Because the Fourth Amendment states that citizens’ property may only be searched or taken with “probable cause,” Section 702’s allowance for U.S. citizens’ data to be searched or taken simply because that data is somehow linked to a non-U.S. person stands to threaten U.S. citizens’ Fourth Amendment protections (“The Bill of Rights”). Yet, despite such a clear threat, the members of the federal government who are involved in the PRISM program continue to claim that the program’s purpose is not to target U.S. citizens, but non-U.S. citizens.

In a June 6, 2013, statement, then Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, responded to The Guardian and The Washington Post’s publishing of top-secret materials leaked by Edward Snowden that document PRISM. Repeating much of the information already provided in Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act of 2008, Clapper confirms that the slides
leaked by Snowden do, indeed, constitute “information about this important and entirely legal program” and that the particular “collection of communications” described by The Guardian and The Washington Post is conducted under the sanction of Section 702 of FISA (“DNI Statement”). While Clapper emphasizes that the intended target of such surveillance is not “any U.S. citizen, any other U.S. person, or anyone located within the United States,” Clapper employs much of the same ambiguous language and qualifiers that are used so extensively in the text of Section 702 (“DNI Statement”). For instance, Clapper states that Section 702 “cannot be used to intentionally target” the previously identified persons and that “extensive procedures” are in place to “minimize the acquisition, retention and dissemination of incidentally acquired information about U.S. persons” (“DNI Statement”). However, as with Section 702, Clapper does not specify the exact procedures of checks and balances through which U.S. persons’ constitutional rights are protected.

One of the most significant aspects of Clapper’s statement is its underlying suggestion that U.S. citizens need not be given detailed clarification of how U.S. citizens’ digital data is protected even as any electronic exchanges with non-U.S. citizens located abroad automatically risks bringing U.S. citizens’ digital data under the purview of Section 702 of FISA. The lack of transparency that permeates not only Section 702, but the Director of National Intelligence’s statement, leaves U.S. citizens with little choice but to implicitly trust that the federal government is not violating their constitutional rights under the Fourth Amendment. Furthermore, it is important to note that, while the wording employed within Section 702 and in Clapper’s statement suggests, at least ostensibly, an effort on the part of the federal government to avoid collecting digital data that pertains to U.S. citizens, the recurring use of terms such as “minimize” and “intentionally” clearly indicate that the privacy of U.S. citizens is not guaranteed
to be protected during surveillance operations sanctioned by Section 702 (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438; “DNI Statement”). Indeed, despite Clapper’s criticisms that Snowden’s leaking of top secret PRISM documents “is reprehensible and risks important protections for the security of Americans,” the wording of the public face of PRISM, Section 702, is itself a sign that the constitutional security of U.S. citizens is potentially under threat from the very federal agencies charged to protect them (“DNI Statement”).

This notion that Section 702 is merely the public face of PRISM, a face which the preceding analysis has shown is almost unidentifiable in its lack of definite features, is important to keep in mind. It is this lack of transparency that has led civil rights advocates such as the ACLU’s Jaffer and Murphy to demand that the hidden operations of PRISM be made open and subject to increased judicial review and public scrutiny. In their 2013 testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Jaffer and Murphy identify key legal mechanisms within the FISA Amendments Act that effectively prevent any meaningful judicial or public oversight of PRISM operations. According to Jaffer and Murphy, “Under Section 702, the FISA Court does not consider individualized and particularized surveillance applications, does not make individualized probable cause determinations, and does not closely supervise the implementation of the government’s targeting or minimization procedures” (10). In other words, after the FISA Court approves a surveillance request that is jointly presented by the Attorney General and the Director of National Intelligence, there is no further judicial oversight of the specific surveillance operations that follow—operations that may last as long as a year, according to Section 702. This lack of judicial oversight carries significant implications.

Even though Section 702 specifies that “upon issuance of an order” from the FISA Court neither the Attorney General nor the Director of National Intelligence “may . . . intentionally
target a person reasonably believed to be located outside the United States if the purpose of such acquisition is to target a particular, known person reasonably believed to be in the United States” (“Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act” 2438), the lack of judicial oversight of a given surveillance operation in the months following the initial court order does little if anything to ensure that U.S. citizens do not eventually become the targets of said surveillance through their digital connections to non-U.S. citizens. The extent of the FISA Court’s lack of judicial oversight is further explained by Jaffer and Murphy: “The judiciary’s traditional role under the Fourth Amendment Act is to serve as a gatekeeper for particular acts of surveillance, but its role under the FISA Amendments Act is to issue advisory opinions blessing in advance broad parameters and targeting procedures, under which the government is then free to conduct surveillance . . . ” (10). The lack of judicial oversight that is sanctioned by Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act has the potential to jeopardize the Fourth Amendment’s guarantee that a U.S. citizen’s privacy, both of person and property, will be violated only “upon probable cause” and under the guidance of a “Warrant” that describes, in detail, “the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized” (“Bill of Rights”). By forfeiting judicial oversight after a surveillance order is issued, the FISA Court offers little to no assurance that U.S. citizens’ digital data will not be investigated throughout the course of an operation that may last up to one year. Furthermore, FISA does not specify that either the Attorney General or the Director of National Intelligence must obtain a warrant if an operation gathers data from a U.S. citizen even as it targets a non-U.S. citizen located abroad, despite strong indications within the Fourth Amendment that a warrant would be necessary in such a case. However, lack of judicial oversight is only one example of how PRISM resists transparency by concealing its day-to-day operations.
Another manifestation of PRISM’s lack of transparency is the lack of publicly available information regarding how surveillance procedures unfold once an operation begins. According to Jaffer and Murphy, “Although the Inspectors General and others file regular reports with the Committees of jurisdiction, these reports do not include even basic information such as how many Americans’ communications are swept up in these programs, or how and when Americans’ information is accessed and used” (15). Furthermore, in addition to not providing detailed information regarding how PRISM operates, federal agencies often prevent internet companies from informing users that the federal government has submitted requests for their data. For instance, according to a recent report by Kartikay Mehrotra for Bloomberg, when Microsoft filed an April 2016 lawsuit against the U.S. Justice Department, the company claimed “that federal courts had issued almost 2,600 secrecy orders barring it from disclosing government warrants for access to private e-mail accounts. It said more than two-thirds of those orders have no fixed end date, meaning the company can never tell customers about them, even after an investigation is completed” (Mehrotra, “Microsoft Asserts Clients’ Rights”). Despite the Justice Department’s assertion that Microsoft has no legal right to sue on behalf of its users’ constitutional rights (Mehrotra, “Microsoft Asserts Clients’ Rights”), U.S. District Judge James Robart declared that Microsoft does have the right to sue the U.S. government in order to determine if such gag orders violate the company’s First Amendment right to free speech by preventing Microsoft from informing its users that they are or have been the target of digital surveillance (Mehrotra, “Microsoft Allowed to Sue U.S. Government”). However, even though Robart approved Microsoft’s ability to sue the government to protect its own constitutional rights, he struck down Microsoft’s secondary assertion that the surveillance practices, themselves, constitute “an unlawful search and seizure of property” and, as such, violate users’ Fourth Amendment rights
(Mehrotra, “Microsoft Allowed to Sue U.S. Government”). As Mehrotra reports, Robart would not allow Microsoft to defend its users’ rights under the constitution because judicial precedent dictates “that such rights can only be asserted by individuals, and not vicariously by third parties . . .” (‘Microsoft Allowed to Sue U.S. Government”). Despite its ability to sue the U.S. government on the basis of defending its First Amendment protections, Microsoft’s current inability to disclose to users that their digital information is or has been surveilled by the government and its ongoing inability to sue on behalf of its users whose own Fourth Amendment rights may have been violated raise serious questions regarding the transparency of government surveillance that is conducted under Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act and provides U.S. citizens as a whole very little public oversight over the surveillance operations that are being conducted by their own government.

**Part Two: The State of Surveillance in Composition Studies**

In 2016, approximately three years following Snowden’s disclosure of the PRISM program through his leaks to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, Estee Beck, Angela Crow, Heidi McKee, Colleen Reilly, Stephanie Vie, Jennifer deWinter, Laura Gonzales and Dânielle DeVoss published a webtext for *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, titled *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality*, in which they draw attention to the widespread surveillance practices conducted by both the United States government and U.S. corporations. The individual pieces of this web text examine surveillance practices as they manifest in a variety of forms from a variety of origins. Topics include government surveillance such as that documented by Edward Snowden’s 2013 leaks of materials documenting the NSA’s data collection practices (Beck, “Writing Educator Responsibilities”), the need for composition studies governing bodies such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) and
the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Computers in Composition and Communication (7Cs) to enact position statements that discourage companies’ secret collection of users’ data (Crow), the importance of understanding and protecting net neutrality to ensure that corporate interests are not privileged over other citizens’ (McKee, “Protecting Net Neutrality”), the necessity that all writing studies partners, including students, instructors and researchers, become more aware of how pervasive digital surveillance really is and use that literacy to demand less secretive tracking practices (Reilly), the extent to which user agency\(^3\) is jeopardized within the digital terrain of online gaming (Vie and deWinter), and writing instructors’ responsibility for making students not just ethical users but also producers of digital media (Gonzales and DeVoss). By examining the presence and consequences of corporate and government surveillance within the United States, these authors draw attention to practices that pervade much, if not most of the digital terrain internet users interact with every day, digital terrain that also makes up the digital learning technologies used in the writing classroom.

Even with its diversity of topics, there are three concerns that the authors of *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality* have in common. First, surveillance practices are a direct threat to the open discourse that the field of rhetoric and composition values so highly, especially when these practices are kept secret. Second, writing instructors and administrators at all levels of the field have an ethical responsibility to defend open discourse by resisting surveillance practices, especially when those practices affect their own students. Finally, the first step toward resisting surveillance is to pay attention to the mechanisms through which it occurs. This last claim, especially, is repeated throughout the web texts that populate this 2016 issue of

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\(^3\) The term “agency” appears frequently throughout this thesis. In reference to human agency, the term is used to denote users’ ability to both make informed decisions about and exert control over networked digital technology, especially in regards to how the data users input and generate through their use of said interfaces is stored and used. For examples of agency being used in this way in composition studies scholarship of the digital, see Selfe 155, Moeller 73, Johnson-Eilola 37 and Reyman 526.
Kairos. Indeed, this notion of paying attention to the problem prior to working out a solution pervades, not only the authors’ responses to the threat of digital surveillance in *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality*, but it is also frequently invoked throughout composition studies scholarship that is concerned with the use of digital learning technologies in the writing classroom. In many respects, this emphasis upon paying attention to the intersection of literacy and technology was pioneered by Cynthia Selfe in her 1999 *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*, in which she asserts the need for writing instructors and administrators to pay attention to ways in which digital writing instruction might create and perpetuate inequality. However, Chapter II demonstrates that Selfe’s emphasis upon paying attention is also foreshadowed in her earlier publications with Gail Hawisher and Richard Selfe. Indeed, Selfe’s call to writing educators to pay critical attention to their technology use and its implications for writing instruction pervades much of the composition studies scholarship on digital literacy published in the last twenty-six years.

It is Selfe’s emphasis upon paying attention to one’s digital practices that has formed much of the groundwork of scholarship regarding ethics and digital writing instruction in recent decades, and the current discussion emerging within composition studies concerning government surveillance is no exception. Indeed, the extent of Selfe’s influence on the current discussion surrounding the impact and implications of surveillance on the writing classroom is indicated by the fact that three of the six web texts contained within *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality* reference Selfe’s research on the intersect between literacy and technology directly (Beck, Reilly, and Gonzales and DeVoss). Furthermore, two of the three web texts that do not contain direct references to Selfe’s work reference sources that, themselves, contain such references (McKee and Vie and deWinter). Finally, even though the remaining web
text contains neither a direct reference to Selfe’s work nor a reference to another source that, itself, contains such a reference, Crow’s assertion that it is the composition studies community’s responsibility “to be doing the groundwork on data collection to decide on the kinds of position statements that will” help to restrict surveillance practices shares key features of Hawisher and Selfe’s 1991 assertion that “we are the architects of the spaces in which our students learn” and that the technological awareness and reforms sought by writing instructors “will not happen automatically in the electronic classroom anymore than in a traditional classroom. We have to labor diligently to bring it about” (64). These and other overlaps with Selfe’s research highlight her persistent contributions to discussions of digital literacy within higher education, and such overlaps suggest that Kairos’ recent exploration of the implications of surveillance for writing instruction in Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality is only the most recent manifestation of a decades-long conversation within composition studies that concerns the ethics of digital writing instruction and ways in which cultural values and practices may be imbedded in and reinscribed by educators and students’ interactions with the digital interface.

While the purpose of this section is not to examine Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality’s in depth, its 2016 publication in Kairos is important to note as it illustrates composition studies’ increased concern regarding the implications of surveillance and, in the case of Beck’s webtext, in particular, government surveillance for the networked, digital first-year writing classroom. Indeed, Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality’s emphasis upon understanding and resisting digital surveillance practices as an invasion of student privacy is only the most recent of many appeals within the field of writing studies aimed at fostering more transparency and more strategic digital literacy among students, instructors and administrators. In Chapter II, approximately twenty-six years of composition
scholarship is reviewed in which scholars express repeated concern that the presence of digital networked technologies within the writing classroom carries serious implications for students—implications that range from unequal access, weakened agency and even loss of privacy due to institutional, corporate and, most recently, government surveillance. However, returning to Crow’s assertion that it is institutional governing bodies such as the CWPA and 7Cs who ultimately need to draft and implement position statements “regarding the ethics of data collection,” it is helpful to review existing position statements in order to gauge how such governing bodies are currently attempting to regulate how digital literacy is fostered and practiced in the context of the first-year writing classroom. Furthermore, a review of these institutional position statements issued by the governing bodies of first-year writing provides a broader institutional context in which to interpret the scholarly conversation that is reviewed in Chapter II, specifically as it pertains to the implications of digital practice within the writing classroom.

**Part Three: Writing Studies’ Position on Digital Literacy**

In the wake of an ever-intensifying wave of new digital learning technologies, oversight organizations of composition studies such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the CWPA struggle to stay abreast of an increasingly networked world in which the act of composition is no longer limited to the creation of print-based alphabetic texts, but includes “a myriad of practices” that include online discussions and presentations to the building of entire websites (CCCC). However, an examination of the position statements such organizations create concerning digital learning in the writing classroom reveals that, with few exceptions, their current concerns are limited primarily to issues of usability and ownership and do not reflect the broad range of
concerns facing users of digital composing technologies today, namely the threat of digital surveillance. Furthermore, even those position statements that touch upon the threat of corporate surveillance and its impact on writing studies students, instructors and administrators do not address the presence or implications of government surveillance on these populations, suggesting that current position statements are in need of reevaluation in light of Snowden’s 2013 leaks.

While the position statements created by the institutional bodies that govern composition studies have yet to address the implications of government surveillance, attention has recently been given to the problem of surveillance in regards to education-related corporations. In February 2016, the NCTE ratified its “Resolution on Student Educational Data Privacy and Security,” in which it asserts that, “[i]n spite of legal provisions, various publishing and assessment companies have released test results carelessly.” According to the NCTE, not only do such illegal releases of student data constitute a violation of “the ethical responsibility of private assessment companies to protect student data,” but educators, themselves, are implicated in such violations as English instructors have a responsibility to “determine how student data should be used in an ethical, lawful, and responsible manner.” It is significant to note that the NCTE, while an organization that serves all English instructors at all levels, from elementary school to college, also demonstrates an enduring concern for issues related to the college writing classroom (“Mission Statement”). Indeed, in light of its recent resolution, the NCTE is, in many respects, a pioneer when it comes to governing bodies’ responses to the threat of surveillance: “As students are tracked, traced, monitored, and scored with more intensity that ever, educators must remain

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4 That the NCTE’s position statements have relevance for first-year writing professionals is suggested by the fact that the organization is frequently referenced in discussions of literacy in higher education (Crow) and that the NCTE houses the scholarly journals, College Composition and Communication, College English, English Education, Research in the Teaching of English and Teaching English in the Two-Year College, all of which consistently feature scholarship that focuses on college writing (“Journals”). In light of the role the NCTE plays in fostering scholarly discussion regarding first-year writing and the role it plays in regards to institutional governance, it follows that the NCTE’s proposed changes to how educators of English navigate threats to student data should also be of concern to educators and administrators of college composition.
informed advocates for their students’ privacy, security, and safety. Thus, we must work collaboratively to ensure that privacy rights and data safeguards are enacted to protect students and families in schools, colleges, and universities.” The NCTE emphasizes the need for educators at all levels to both understand and respond to the networked digital interface’s threat to student privacy. However, such statements are not common in the position statements of composition studies’ governing bodies. Indeed, the NCTE’s recent resolution is unique for the NCTE, itself, as its position statements do not often address the threat of surveillance, corporate or otherwise. Whereas the NCTE’s recently ratified resolution emphasizes the need for educators to exert controls on how student data is tracked and used by “publishing and assessment companies,” statements made by other governing bodies, including the NCTE, itself, do not often address the practice, implications or possible responses to surveillance.

Far from considering issues related to surveillance, the vast majority of statements released by the institutional bodies that govern college composition are concerned primarily with issues of proficiency and access. For instance, in its July 2014 “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” the CWPA, while recognizing that “digital technologies are changing writers’ relationships to their texts and audiences in evolving ways,” limits its considerations of such transforming relationships to matters of digital proficiency. Specifically, the CWPA states that upon completing their first-year writing requirement, a student should be able to “[a]dapt composing processes for a variety of technologies and modalities.” Yet, despite its assertion that students be fostered as digital composers, the CWPA’s statement does not clarify what the particular form of digital literacy it envisions actually looks like in practice. Like the legislation that ostensibly governs federal agencies’ surveillance procedures, namely that found in Section 702 of FISA, the wording of the CWPA’s “Outcomes Statement” is ambiguous and does not
directly address many of the potential challenges facing students who, as users of the “variety of technologies” being assigned in the first-year writing classroom, are potentially under threat of surveillance.

Whereas the NCTE addresses the threat of corporate surveillance to students and educators, the CWPA does not address the threat of surveillance at all. Admittedly, the NCTE’s attention to issues of surveillance has only emerged recently, and much of its previous concern regarding the intersection between writing studies and digital literacy revolved around issues of student access. For instance, in its November 2005 “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies,” the NCTE offers none of the language found in “Resolution on Student Educational Data Privacy and Security” that addresses the issue of corporate surveillance and the need for educators to protect student data. Concerned primarily with issues of student access, the NCTE “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” asserts that “[i]nstitutions and teachers must create ways to bridge the digital divide, providing access and resources for all students.” The NCTE’s 2005 assertion that students be ensured access to digital learning technologies and the CWPA’s statement that students must be proficient with said technologies upon completion of the first-year writing requirement are two of the primary concerns that are echoed throughout the institutional visions created by composition studies’ governing bodies, leaving the NCTE’s 2016 resolution regarding the threat of corporate surveillance a rarity amongst institutional position statements.

Despite a notable lack of attention to issues of surveillance within the institutional discourse produced by composition studies’ governing bodies, there are early indications within this discourse that foreshadow the NCTE’s 2016 resolution, a resolution which, while not addressing government surveillance, specifically, does address the issue of surveillance
committed by educational companies. For example, in the “Declarations concerning the unique capacities and challenges of digital forms” portion of the NCTE’s “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies,” the NCTE takes a step beyond concerns of digital access and addresses the ethical questions that arise as a result of such use. Citing “ethical, critical, and legal considerations,” the NCTE tasks writing instructors to educate students about how their acts of digital composition participate in larger social, political and economic contexts, a stance that implies that the absence of such education may result in consequences for students and, perhaps, instructors. While the NCTE’s statement does not elaborate overmuch concerning what “ethical, critical, and legal considerations” it is referring to, its assertion that “digital publishing . . . will blur and complicate the ethical issues of ownership, plagiarism, and authenticity” suggests that it is concerned primarily with the question of how students are taught to navigate complex questions of intellectual property, questions made all the more difficult due to the ease of access afforded by digital technology. The CWPA, too, expresses concern that students “[e]xplore the concepts of intellectual property (such as fair use and copyright) that motivate documentation conventions” and be able to “make informed decisions about intellectual property issues” as they compose for the writing classroom. Even with their limited focus, the NCTE and the CWPA statements demonstrate growing concern for the ways in which digital technologies may create ethical and legal challenges within the writing classroom, challenges that go beyond issues of access and proficiency and ask instructors and administrators to develop their own literacy regarding how their digital literacy practices participate in and are implicated by the larger institutional, national and even global contexts in which such practices unfold. Both the WPA and the NCTE envision the role of the writing instructor as teaching students to ethically compose and use digital texts, with ethical action defined primarily as not infringing upon
another author’s ownership. However, by defining ethics in the digital realm primarily in terms of ownership, the NCTE (with the exception of its 2016 resolution) and WPA overlook other dangers that can accompany digital composition.

While the NCTE and WPA may largely underestimate the complexity and severity of the problems facing writing programs and instructors as they cultivate digital literacy in the composition classroom, the CCCC’s Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments illustrates how governing bodies in composition studies might work to develop a greater understanding of the complex nature of ethical composition in networked digital learning environments. This committee, consisting of influential writing scholars such as Kathleen Yancey, Andrea Lunsford and Cynthia Selfe, has created a position statement on digital literacy, which, while not addressing all or even the most problematic issues facing digital writing instructors and students, does help to draw attention to the need for higher education institutions and instructors to investigate the theories and practices of digital composition more critically. Composed in 2004, the “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” states that digital writing courses must “introduce students to the epistemic (knowledge-structuring) characteristics of information technology” and “prepare students to be reflecting practitioners.” By making such calls to action, the CCCC emphasizes the need for instructors to think more critically about their technology use and how the use of digital interfaces shapes the meaning of the texts being created and how the complex nature of networked interfaces implicates users in networked knowledge production. The practical and ethical implications of the digital interface for first-year writing are explored in more depth in Chapter Two in the context of research conducted by scholars such as Hawisher, Selfe, Faigley, Selfe, Vie, Johnson-Eilola, McKee, Reyman and Beck. However, many of these
scholars’ assertions involve a variation on those made in the “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments.”

By emphasizing digital technology use as a networked practice demanding critical reflection, the CCCC provides a welcome antidote to the sometimes narrow approaches entities such as the NCTE and WPA have taken toward the teaching of digital literacy. Like the NCTE and WPA, the CCCC is concerned with the maintenance of boundaries regarding the “ownership of intellectual property” and asserts that writing program administrators have a responsibility to establish such boundaries “before online classes commence.” However, by not limiting their discussions of the relationship between digital literacy and ethics to questions of intellectual property, the CCCC works to open up a wider variety of considerations regarding the implications of technology use. Furthermore, while the “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” does not directly address the threat of surveillance as the NCTE does in its 2016 resolution, the CCCC’s emphasis upon understanding how knowledge is generated in response to digital interfaces allows for consideration of how the digital interface interacts with human beings in general, thereby allowing for an ever-expanding discussion of the implications of digital technology in first-year writing that is not equally fostered in other institutional position statements.

However, even with the CCCC’s opening of new doors regarding discussions of digital writing theory and practice within composition studies, the CCCC does not touch upon one of the greatest concerns facing instructors and students of first year writing today: the endangerment of student privacy. As previously indicated, whereas the NCTE’s 2005 “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” limits its concerns regarding digital literacy to questions of access and ownership, the NCTE’s 2016 “Resolution on Student Educational Data Privacy and
Security” expands its discussion of digital writing to address concerns of “students’ privacy, security, and safety,” suggesting that college writing administrators and instructors “must work collaboratively to ensure that privacy rights and data safeguards are enacted to protect students and families in schools, colleges, and universities.” This call to action is remarkable for college writing’s governing bodies, not because they have not issued calls to action in the past and not because they are not deeply invested in the cultivation of reflective digital learning environments, but because very few of the mandates issued by these governing bodies assert administrators and instructors’ obligation to protect students’ privacy in such affirmative terms. In its recent “Resolution,” the NCTE emphasizes not only its own responsibility for protecting student privacy through its institutional discourse and practices, but it places the same responsibility on the shoulders of administrators and instructors.

However, even though the NCTE has helped to further the institutional discussion surrounding digital literacy in college writing by addressing the responsibility of colleges, universities and instructors to protect student privacy in digital learning environments, the perpetrators that the NCTE identifies as threatening student privacy consist primarily of “publishing and assessment companies [that] have released test results carelessly.” As such, these companies are the only specific entity that the NCTE identifies as a threat to student privacy. The only other potential threats identified are much more general and encompass the framework of higher education, itself, and its need for reform in order to meet the demands of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in its securing of student data. While the NCTE’s criticism of “publishing and assessment companies” for mishandling student data suggests a move in the direction of cultivating greater awareness of the threats digital technologies hold for student privacy, it, as with the other governing bodies that make
recommendations to oversee first-year writing instruction, has yet to address the implication of corporate surveillance in a substantive way (“Resolution”). Furthermore, first-year writing’s governing bodies still have yet to address one of the greatest potential threats to the privacy, not just of students, but of instructors, administrators and the citizens of the United States as a whole: government surveillance.

**Part Four: An Outline of this Thesis**

As the following chapters attest, one of the primary purposes of this thesis is to address the gap left by the institutional governing bodies of composition studies in response to the ongoing threat of government surveillance, a phenomenon that carries profound implications for how writing professionals conceive of the role of the networked digital interface within the writing classroom. However, this absence is not restricted to governing bodies such as the NCTE, CCCC and WPA. It is also felt within the rich body of scholarship that explores the implications of the networked digital interface for the first-year writing. Chapter II explores this gap in digital writing scholarship by reviewing relevant scholarship spanning the approximately twenty-six year period between 1991 and 2017. It is demonstrated that a great deal of composition studies scholarship exists that explores the implications of digital technology in the writing classroom and, specifically, how digital interfaces, far from being neutral composing tools, actually reinscribe cultural values and practices in ways that may harm students by reinforcing inequality and power. Furthermore, Chapter II illustrates how strongly Selfe’s influence is felt throughout digital literacy scholarship within composition studies, and her call to writing instructors to pay attention to their technology practices and how such practices may reinscribe harmful cultural values permeates such scholarship, especially in regards to how the digital interface may jeopardize students’ agency.
As digital literacy scholarship unfolds between 1991 and 2017, the fear of students’ agency being mitigated by the digital interface only intensifies, especially in light of its increasingly complex, networked and invisible\(^5\) nature. Chapter II demonstrates that recent scholarship has explored the implications of corporate and, most recently, government surveillance for the networked writing classroom, and scholars frequently invoke Selfe’s mandate to pay attention as the primary method of defense against such invasive, agency-mitigating practices. However, a review of the scholarly literature that considers the implications of the digital interface within the writing classroom suggests that previous attempts to articulate and respond to the various threats of the digital interface do not necessarily apply to the threat of government surveillance. Specifically, the efficacy of Selfe’s call to educators to pay attention to their technology practices is questionable in the face of government surveillance practices that are shrouded in secrecy. Furthermore, a review of scholarly literature suggests that digital literacy scholars’ invoking of Selfe’s mandate to pay attention to technology in order to preserve student agency overlooks the possibility that the complexly networked nature of the digital interface, especially in regards to the secret nature of government surveillance, may not allow for traditional notions of human agency. As Chapter IV attests, alien phenomenology is a promising theoretical framework through which to reevaluate the role of human agency in light of government surveillance, primarily because its emphasis upon the ultimately unknowable nature of all phenomena resists reinscribing democratic humanist notions of agency in response to networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.

\(^5\) Throughout this thesis, the term invisibility is frequently used to denote ways in which networked digital technology operates and affects users in often unperceived ways. This use of invisibility is in keeping with its use throughout composition studies. For examples of this term’s use in composition studies scholarship of the digital, see Selfe and Selfe 481; Reyman 514, 517; Beck, “The Invisible Digital Identity” 125-126, 128-133, 135-139; Reilly; Vie and deWinter; Gonzales and DeVoss.
However, prior to exploring the potential of alien phenomenology as a more flexible theoretical framework through which to pay attention to government surveillance, Chapter III analyzes composition studies discourse through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, namely his theory of habitus as developed in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* and *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. It is demonstrated that Selfe’s call to writing professionals to pay attention to their technology use serves to reinscribe democratic humanist values, both in Selfe’s own research and in other scholars’ application of her research in response to the networked digital interface. By analyzing Selfe’s research through the lens of habitus, it is demonstrated that Selfe’s call to pay attention reinscribes democratic humanist ideology by positing a causal relationship between the act of paying attention and the preservation of human agency. It is argued that Selfe’s call to pay attention is, like the networked digital interface itself, “non-innocent” in that it functions as an ideological interface that reinscribes democratic humanist assumptions of agency in response to the networked digital interface (Selfe and Selfe 495). As an embodiment of democratic humanism, Selfe’s call to pay attention operates as a “structuring structure” through which composition studies’ discussion of the networked digital interface and, most recently, government surveillance is shaped (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 170). It is argued that the reinscription of a democratic humanist vision of paying attention as a practice that results in increased agency has prevented scholars from paying attention to the phenomenon of government surveillance without bias. As a result of this democratic humanist bias, composition studies scholars have been prevented from considering the possibility that the goal of democratic humanism as practiced within composition studies, the cultivation and protection of student agency, may not be attainable while interacting with commonly used networked digital interfaces that have been implicated in ongoing government surveillance. It is argued that, while Selfe’s
admonition to writing studies professionals to pay attention to their digital writing practices underlies much of the digital literacy scholarship created during the past twenty-six years, Selfe’s correlation of paying attention with increased agency demands reconsideration in the face of the deeply threatening and *alien* practice of government surveillance.

As with Selfe, alien phenomenologists such as Graham Harman, Bernhard Waldenfels, Ian Bogost and Levi Bryant suggest that human beings should pay attention to the objects they encounter. However, whereas Selfe asserts that writing studies professionals must pay attention to their digital literacy practices in order to foster a world that is “more clearly informed by democratic and humanistic values for the human beings we teach” (161), alien phenomenology seeks, according to Waldenfels, in *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, to “propagate a special kind of *epoché* that instigates a suspension of assumptions that are taken for granted, a departure from the familiar, a stepping-back in front of the alien” (84). In a “departure from the familiar” characterization of paying attention as a path to increased agency, Chapter IV discusses the implications of alien phenomenology for how composition studies scholars respond to government surveillance (Waldenfels 84). It is suggested that composition studies scholars’ attempts to pay attention to the complex ways networked digital technologies implicate writing professionals actually serve to reify democratic humanist values and do not reflect unbiased engagement with the technologies themselves and their material impact on students, instructors and administrators. Chapter IV discusses how writing professionals may adopt alien phenomenology as a theoretical perspective through which to observe threatening digital practices such as government surveillance without necessarily reducing such practices to the observer’s biased ethical, philosophical and political viewpoint. In other words, alien phenomenology, far from representing a rejection of Selfe and other writing studies scholars’
emphasis upon paying attention, actually represents a less ideologically-loaded incarnation of exactly this practice. Indeed, it is only by paying attention to the alien that one may arrive at new pathways through which to consider it. Chapter IV argues that by paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology, writing professionals may cease to assume that the act of paying attention correlates to increased agency. Rather, alien phenomenology may allow writing professionals to consider the possibility that human agency is not sustainable as users interact with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.

Lastly, this thesis reflects on the future of the field of writing studies in light of government surveillance practices. This research posits that such practices significantly complicate composition studies’ understanding of human agency, especially in regards to Selfe’s correlation of increased agency with the act of paying attention to technology, a correlation that continues to influence composition studies scholars’ research on the networked digital interface. While strategies exist through which writing professionals may attempt to resist practices of government surveillance, it is suggested that no digital defense is invulnerable. In light of the ever-present threat of government surveillance, it is argued that writing professionals can no longer assume that agency can be sustained even as teachers and students interact with increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces, many of which are implicated in government surveillance. In the face of these digital threats to human agency, it is recommended that all networked digital interfaces be considered alien and threatening, that the networked writing classroom, itself, be recognized as a space in which agency may not be sustainable.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This rhetoric—one of hope, vision, and persuasion—is the primary voice present in most of the work we see coming out of computers-and-composition studies, and it is positive in the sense that it reflects the high expectations of instructors committed to positive educational reform in their writing classes. This same rhetoric; however, may also be dangerous if we want to think critically about technology and its uses. (57)

-- Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class”

Unlike redwoods and lichen and salamanders, computers don’t carry the baggage of vivacity. They are plastic and metal corpses with voodoo powers. (9)

-- Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*

Chapter II provides an overview of writing studies scholarship that focuses on the implications of new media use in the college writing classroom, especially in regards to how the digital interface may jeopardize student agency. One of the purposes of this review is to familiarize readers with composition studies’ ongoing concerns regarding the use of digital technology in higher education, concerns that have most recently encompassed the implications of government surveillance for writing instruction. However, a review of composition studies literature on digital literacy produced during the last twenty-six years suggests that, while interest is growing regarding the implications of government surveillance, that interest is limited in scope and does not devote sufficient attention to the facilitative role internet companies have played in the United States government’s ongoing surveillance of its citizens. While Chapter I: Part One of this thesis addresses this gap by evaluating Section 702 of FISA (the portion of the Act that forms the legal justification for the NSA’s surveillance via the PRISM program), a review of composition studies scholarship that is focused on the implications of digital literacy suggests that such in-depth investigation of the legal contexts and debates that shape government surveillance is generally lacking in composition studies research, making the information
contained in Chapter I: Part One all the more timely. Furthermore, a review of composition studies scholarship that concerns digital writing instruction reflects a persistent narrative that positions Selfe’s call to pay attention as the beginning of a solution to many of the complications that result from digital media use in the writing classroom.

**Part One: 1990s Considerations of Technoliteracy in the Scholarship of Cynthia Selfe, Gail Hawisher, Lester Faigley and Richard Selfe**

In any discussion of technoliteracy and the implications of the networked digital interface for first year writing, it would be difficult if not altogether impossible to ignore the pioneering work of Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe. As indicated in Chapter I, even the most recent in-depth composition studies scholarship focusing on surveillance, *Kairos’* recent collective web text, *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality*, makes reference to Hawisher and Selfe’s scholarship and repeated references to Selfe’s research, specifically. Indeed, Hawisher and Selfe’ investigations into how technology shapes power within the writing classroom continue to influence digital writing scholarship to this day. In their 1991 essay, “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class,” Hawisher and Selfe critique what they consider to be overly optimistic characterizations of classroom learning technologies, narratives which serve to conceal ways in which technology risks limiting student agency by reinforcing traditional teacher-centered classroom power hierarchies. In order to draw attention to this potential for inequality, Hawisher and Selfe examine technologies in the classroom as “cultural artifacts embodying society’s values,” values that instructors risk perpetuating through uninvestigated use (55). This notion that technologies are not neutral, but embody social meaning and power structures accomplishes vital theoretical groundwork on which later scholars will build in order to establish that technology practices within the classroom carry ideological
implications for students, instructors and administrators. Employing the lens of Michel Foucault, Hawisher and Selfe suggest that “the architecture of electronic spaces can put some students at a disadvantage” (60), a situation that risks reinforcing traditional classroom hierarchies and working against “a theory of teaching in which we understand knowledge as socially constructed by both teachers and students” (59). While Hawisher and Selfe’s critique is concerned with the potential for writing classroom technologies and technological practices to embody inequality and exploitation, it also conveys fear that classroom practices, including practices related to technology, may naturalize certain values, thereby investing them with a priori value, a practice which challenges Hawisher and Selfe’s belief that knowledge is collectively created and does not exist a priori.

In a statement that seems prophetic in light of Snowden’s 2013 revelations of the NSA’s PRISM program, Hawisher and Selfe draw attention to the potential for technology to facilitate the active surveillance of its users. Hawisher and Selfe point out that “those who have conversed over computers will recognize how eavesdropping and watching are made easy through the architecture of an electronic network. . . . As in corporate settings, the architecture of computer networking may encourage ‘surveillance’ of participants” (63). By drawing attention to the potential for learning technologies to facilitate the surveillance of users, Hawisher and Selfe signal concern that students, as users of technologies both within the writing classroom and without, are potentially subject to such surveillance practices. Though published in 1991, Hawisher and Selfe’s “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” expresses a concern for the invasion of student privacy and weakening of student agency, a concern that has only intensified in the decades since. Furthermore, though Hawisher and Selfe are concerned primarily with student surveillance as a practice initiated by higher education instructors and
administrators through classroom technologies, many of the claims made are also applicable to how writing instructors and administrators respond to government surveillance in the present. In a move that foreshadows Selfe’s later mandate in *Technology and Literacy* to pay attention, Hawisher and Selfe suggest that instructors and administrators have an ethical obligation to investigate and understand the technologies being used by students in the classroom in order to ensure that such technology use does not harm students. Indeed, much of the digital writing scholarship reviewed in this chapter invokes the same mandate: writing instructors and administrators must take responsibility for technological practices occurring in the writing classroom.

Like Hawisher and Selfe, Lester Faigley helped to encourage and shape early scholarly discussion of the role of technology in the college writing classroom. Also, like Hawisher and Selfe, Faigley is concerned with how instructors and administrators’ technology choices for the writing classroom participate in and embody larger ideological conflicts and power structures. In his 1992 book, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, Faigley explores how postmodern theory may serve as a theoretical lens through which to productively consider composition studies theory and practice. Specifically, in the chapter titled “The Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom,” Faigley contributes to early scholarship on digital literacy by exploring the benefits and dangers that may accompany the transformation of the composition classroom into a networked digital learning environment. Employing Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “‘hyperreality,’” Faigley describes how reality is constructed in postmodern America through a vast network of signs that include “economics, politics, and other domains of the social” (164). Echoing Hawisher and Selfe’s emphasis upon fostering classroom relationships to technology that construct knowledge as negotiated and not a priori (59), Faigley
suggests that human beings’ inability to access an absolute reality carries dramatic implications for how instructors approach negotiating right and wrong practice in the writing classroom (164). Furthermore, Faigley indicates that, in light of the increasingly networked nature of knowledge production that is increasingly dominant through digital learning technologies, the writing instructor is obliged to more closely evaluate the ideological influences at work in their classroom (165-167, 199), a sentiment that reflects Hawisher and Selfe’s assertion that technological objects occupying the classroom space are “cultural artifacts embodying society’s values” (55). Faigley’s views on the role of ideology in the writing classroom become clear during his discussion of early fears of technology giving way to a view of technology as a community-building force.

While Faigley acknowledges early fears that the rise of computers in the writing classroom would transform it into an automated, “antihumanistic” space of “domination” (Faigley 166), he goes on to explore the potential for “networked computers” to enable “everyone to ‘talk’ at once” and, in doing so, allow instructors to overcome the traditional, teacher-focused power structure of higher education by finally creating a truly “‘student-centered’ classroom” (167). Faigley describes how, through the advent of conferencing software such as Realtime Writer and InterChange, instructors have the ability to facilitate student interaction in a digital realm in which traditional sources of division and exploitation on the basis of race and gender may be mitigated because students can interact with the software anonymously (168-170). Published in 1992, Faigley’s account of the enthusiasm with which he initially responded to the networked digital interface, InterChange, echoes the enthusiasm felt by writing professionals, in general, in response to the rapid emergence of learning technologies that promised to make peer collaboration more efficient. Commenting on the potential for digital
networked technologies to destabilize traditional authority in the writing classroom by facilitating student-student interactions, Faigley states that he had “become a student in his own class” (181). Furthermore, Faigley reports that his early experiences with networked learning “convinced [him] that even if patriarchal social structures do not vanish when students use InterChange . . . , some of the socially defined limits assigned to gender are mitigated” (181). Likewise, Faigley saw indications that even international students felt more comfortable engaging in the networked discussions because the lack of a “foreign accent” while participating in the online discussion forum gave them “greater license to speak” (182). However, this momentary achievement of democratic harmony was not to last.

As Faigley’s use of InterChange continued, he found that students would engage in aggressive debates in which students’ racism and sexism came into the open and influenced the trajectory and tone of the discussion (189). Faigley points out how, despite the potential for networked communication forums to encourage open discourse, rupture traditional classroom authority and challenge race and gender-based societal divisions, inequality and pressure still find their way into the digital classroom, just as they have penetrated the physical (190). Like Hawisher and Selfe, Faigley draws attention to the increasingly prominent role digital learning technologies play in the writing classroom and, having been published in 1991 and 1992, respectively, Hawisher and Selfe and Faigley’s articles represent early considerations of how instructors and administrators’ technology choices in the writing classroom carry significant ideological implications. Indeed, Selfe and Hawisher and Faigley’s emphasis on the ideologically-loaded nature of instructor and administrators’ technologies choices within the classroom represents the beginning of a larger narrative in which writing studies professionals
are positioned as having a responsibility, perhaps even an ethical mandate, to use classroom technology in ways that foster student agency and other democratic values.

Selke continues to develop the investigation she began with Hawisher into the implications of technology use for first-year writing through her collaboration with Richard Selke as they examine the role of the interface in one’s technology use, a relationship that has profound implications for how writing instructors construct and perform digital literacy. In their 1994 essay, “The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones,” Selke and Selke adopt the metaphor of physical borders to explore the implications of computer use in the writing classroom, arguing that instructors’ unconscious use of computers risks reinforcing a variety of inequalities among student populations (481). Specifically, the authors examine how the computer interface reinforces and naturalizes the values of capitalism, inequalities in social and economic class (486-488), perpetuates colonial practices through the privileging of Standard American English (SAE) (488-491) and even emphasizes the Western intellectual tradition’s fixation on rationalism while rejecting other methods of knowledge formation (491-494). As such, Selke and Selke’s argument extends that developed by Faigley approximately two years earlier, in which he argues that, in a postmodern world, “Electronic written discussions are governed by the logic of consumer choice” (190). In other words, users’ interactions with digital interfaces are not wholly autonomous and are influenced by a variety of complex social factors. Ultimately, the authors outline a course of action in response to these and other inequalities that are embodied in computer interfaces. This course of action begins with instructors viewing their technology use through a more critical lens, through which writing professionals see “the interface as an interested and partial map of our culture and as a linguistic contact zone that reveals power differentials” (Selke and Selke 494-495). Interestingly, Selke and Selke’s discussion
of the interface as a contact zone through which cultural values and power structures are reinscribed foreshadows a larger concern in composition studies with ways in which users’ interactions with digital interfaces implicate users in larger, complex social webs that serve to reinscribe cultural values without the user necessarily being aware that such values are being reinscribed.

In a testament to the influence of Selfe and Selfe on future scholarship, Collin Brooke, in his 2009 book, *Lingua Fracta*, unpacks Selfe and Selfe’s argument even further as he explores the role of the interface in shaping how users of technology help to construct the digital interfaces with which they interact. Making use of Richard Lanham’s notion of looking at versus looking through technology that Lanham developed in his book, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology and the Arts* (Brooke 132), Brooke argues that, while “transparency and reflectivity do . . . exist on a continuum, . . . our own position along that continuum is never static” (133). In other words, when users interact with a digital interface, the interface, itself, expands to include the user, thereby implicating him or her in the construction of that interface. Often, the mechanisms through which users are implicated in the construction of the interface are rendered invisible to those users. Brooke cites an example from “The Politics of the Interface,” in which Selfe and Selfe address the potential for technology to both embody and reinscribe cultural values (Brooke 133-134):

The rhetoric of technology obscures the fact that, within our current educational system—even though computers are associated with the potential for great reform—they are not necessarily serving democratic ends. Computer interfaces, for example, are also sites within which the ideological and material legacies of racism, sexism, and
colonialism are continuously written and re-written along with more positive cultural legacies. (Selfe and Selfe 484)

Selfe and Selfe’s scholarship suggests and Brooke’s scholarship reinforces that, because many of the mechanisms though which cultural values are “written and re-written” are rendered invisible for technology users, those values can be reinscribed both by the interface itself upon the user and the user upon the interface, potentially without end.

Selfe and Selfe voice a concern among composition studies scholars that would only increase over the years, a concern that technologies’ tendency to render cultural values invisible through the interface may make it difficult for users to resist those cultural values that reinscribe exploitative power structures. Indeed, such power structures are insidious, and “are represented and reproduced in so many commonplace ways, at so many levels, that they frequently remain invisible to us” (Selfe and Selfe 481). Yet, for Selfe and Selfe, as with later digital rhetoric and writing scholars such as Brooke, the first, best response to the insidious and invisible ways in which technological interfaces may reinscribe exploitative cultural values is to no longer view interfaces as innocent and value-free; rather, “[t]he point is that we as users participate in the construction of our interfaces” (Brooke 134).

Selfe and Selfe take this argument even further, and, adopting a social activist tone, argue that educators have to learn to recognize—and teach students to recognize—the interface as an interested and partial map of our culture and as a linguistic contact zone that reveals power differentials. We need to teach students and ourselves to recognize computer interfaces as non-innocent physical borders (between the regular world and the virtual world), cultural borders (between the haves and the have-nots), and linguistic borders. . . .
We also need to teach students and ourselves useful strategies of crossing—and demystifying—these borders. It is important to understand that we continually re-map and renegotiate borders in our lives. (495)

The authors go on to argue that writing instructors must become, not just users of technology, but “technology critics,” a process that obliges instructors to develop a greater familiarity with how learning technologies operate and also requires departments and institutions to offer more training opportunities for the instructors themselves (497). Significantly, Selfe and Selfe, as well as Brooke, position the invisibility of the interface as one of its most problematic aspects and seek to increase readers’ awareness of ways in which users’ interaction with digital interfaces implicates users in larger cultural values and social practices. Future scholars such as Jessica Reyman, Estee Beck, Colleen Reilly and Angela Crow would continue to focus on issues of secrecy in regards to the digital interface, often arguing for increased transparency so that users may make more informed decisions concerning their digital imprint. However, Selfe and Selfe’s consideration of the role of the digital interface in writing studies raises serious questions of agency and what the role of human agency will be as users increasingly engage with immensely complex, ideologically-loaded, digital interfaces.

In 1997, echoing composition studies’ growing disillusionment with the utopian assumptions that networked digital technology would foster greater equality within higher education and society as a whole, Faigley published “Literacy after the Revolution,” a revised, print version of his 1996 Chair’s address for the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). In “Literacy after the Revolution,” Faigley expands on the issues he raised in “The Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom” by exploring the impact of what he terms “the digital revolution” on college writing instruction (32). As in “The Achieved
Utopia of the Networked Classroom,” Faigley describes how the integration of networked computers into writing classrooms initially led to the creation of “new pedagogies because the traditional lines of authority had to be renegotiated” (35). However, Faigley identifies “the coming of the Internet and the World Wide Web” as leading to “another major renegotiation of pedagogy and authority” in composition studies (35). Initially, the access provided by the internet gave students unprecedented access to public forums in which to discuss current issues (Faigley 35). However, Faigley observes that citizens’ ability to engage in public internet forums “does not necessarily lead to a more informed public, increased civic engagement, or enhanced democracy” (36). Tracing the rise of the Internet from its beginnings during the Cold War (36) to its current incarnation as a vast, privatized network influenced largely by corporate interests (37-38), Faigley draws attention to the increasingly complex nature of the internet and the growing presence of stakeholders seeking to manipulate users for their own ends. While Faigley praises the potential for the internet to provide users with the ability to present narratives to the public that would otherwise be obscured, such as the Zapatistas’ ability to communicate their struggle through online forums (39), he warns of the opportunity the internet offers corporations to “buy up the technology to control how we work, how we get information, how we shop, how we relax, and how we communicate with other people” (38). Indeed, The Guardian and The Washington Post’s 2013 publication of Snowden’s leaks documenting the NSA’s PRISM program is an even more recent example of how digital media enables users to have access to otherwise inaccessible information. However, as Selfe and Selfe observed in 1994, “computer interfaces . . . [are] non-innocent . . . borders” that implicate users in larger cultural values and practices (495). For instance, even as institutions of higher education seek to provide internet access to all of their students (Faigley 38), troubling divisions continue to persist in which access to computers and
the internet is heavily skewed toward white citizens, with African-American citizens being left behind (Faigley 40). Composed in the last five years of the twentieth century, “Literacy after the Revolution” points to digital writing scholarship’s increasing concern for the potential for students and citizens, in general, to be implicated and exploited by techno-literacy initiatives.

In response to the threatening implications of the digital interface, Faigley posits what was fast becoming a dominant strategy amongst composition studies scholars in response to networked digital technology. Faigley concludes “After the Revolution” by addressing the role increased user awareness must play in “promot[ing] a literacy that challenges monopolies of knowledge and information . . . [and] lessen[ing] rather than widen[ing] social divisions . . . ” (41). For Faigley, as for Selfe, Hawisher and Selfe, an effective response to the ideologically charged nature of the digital interface lies in increased awareness and open discussion:

I don’t think there is any big answer but there are some little ones. You have to look outward. You have to be smarter and more aware. You have to look for opportunities to inform people about what you do. You have to practice what you preach and engage in public discourse. You have to form alliances. You have to be more tolerant of your friends and look for common ground. You have to organize. (41)

Faigley’s emphasis upon increased awareness and discussion continues to be echoed in much of the technoliteracy scholarship that has been published by writing scholars to this day. This mandate for users to become more aware of the ideological implications of their interactions with the digital interface is a powerful one.

Chapter I’s emphasis upon the social and legal context in which NSA surveillance has unfolded in recent years is, in part, an attempt to increase awareness of the issue of surveillance and its potential impact upon U.S. citizens’ web use, many of whom are using digital interfaces
such as Microsoft in performance of their writing classroom duties. However, Faigley and other scholars’ emphasis on increased awareness as a first step toward making informed technology choices is challenged by the hidden nature of NSA surveillance and the secretive mechanisms through which such surveillance operates, secrecy that is, as demonstrated in Chapter I, built into the law, itself, through Section 702 of FISA. Despite this potential difficulty of applying Faigley and other early digital writing scholars’ recommendations as an effective response to NSA surveillance, it is important to note that this emphasis upon cultivating awareness of one’s technology use is a powerful, often ethically-charged mandate that pervades much of digital writing scholarship to this day.

In many ways, Selfe’s 1999, *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*, represents the culmination of the discussions scholars such as Selfe, Hawisher, Selfe and Faigley had been having throughout the 1990s regarding the disruptive role digital learning technologies may play in the discourse and practice of first-year writing. Selfe expands on this concern by interrogating the ideological implications of technology use within the sociopolitical contexts of techno-literacy initiatives in the United States. Echoing her and Richard Selfe’s claims in “The Politics of the Interface,” Selfe argues that the country’s techno-literacy initiatives perpetuate “serious and shameful inequities . . . within our culture and the public education system, including the continuing presence of racism, poverty and illiteracy” (xix). Refining arguments presented in her previous work, she asserts in *Technology and Literacy* that the technologies we use may embody unequal power relations and that the most significant way instructors can resist perpetuating inequality is by first becoming more aware of the ethical implications of one’s technology use. Selfe writes that educators must first “pay attention to technology and literacy problems on a local level” before they attempt to
create more wide-reaching responses (147). Selfe’s emphasis upon paying attention in Technology and Literacy constitutes a refinement of her and Richard Selfe’s call for writing instructors “to adopt a more critical and reflective approach to their use of computers” in “The Politics of the Interface,” and it would grow to become a motto for a great deal of digital literacy scholarship to come (482). Furthermore, Selfe’s mandate to educators to “pay attention” to their technology use reflects a further distillation of Faigley’s argument that technology users must “be smarter and more aware” of how their technology use implicates them in the reinscribing of cultural values and practices (41). However, whereas previous scholarship on the need to pay attention to technology explored the cultivating of such awareness as one of many strategies through which educators may respond to the ideologically-problematic nature of the interface, Selfe’s Technology and Literacy is unique in that it takes the practice of paying attention as, not just the necessary beginning of any substantive resistance to the interface’s tendency to reinscribe power inequities onto its users, but, for Selfe, paying attention is a life-time practice without end.

Just as Brooke would later argue that users’ relationship to the digital interface “is never static” because the user is constantly inscribing the interface with cultural value even as the interface inscribes itself upon the user (133), Selfe describes the mutually-reinforcing relationship between human beings and technology in the context of technoliteracy initiatives in the United States:

We have seen the twin strands of technology and literacy become woven into the fabric of our lives. They are now inscribed in legislation, in the warp and woof of our culture. Recognizing this context, however, we have an even greater responsibility to keep sight of both formations. We must remind ourselves that laws write the texts of people’s lives,
that they constantly inscribe their intent and power on individuals. . . . It is our obligation, as educators, to commit ourselves to reading and analyzing these texts and the lives of students—honestly, with respect, and to the very best of our abilities. (160)

In this passage, Selfe positions the technology user and, by extension, all writing studies educators and students, as constantly oscillating between the twin poles of technology and literacy. As educators and students interact with digital interfaces, those interfaces inscribe educators and students with cultural values that reflect complex networks of relations encompassing the legal, social, economic and political. Likewise, such interactions serve to inscribe the interface, itself, with the values embodied in the user. Ultimately, Selfe’s vision, despite her emphasis upon the ideological threats facing educators and students, is optimistic in that Selfe positions the interface as a two-way street in which users exercise their agency and foster a digital interface that embodies the cultural values of democracy and humanism, rather than values that Selfe positions as more exploitative by virtue of not being either democratic or humanist. Indeed, Selfe concludes Technology and Literacy by asserting that educators “need to become increasingly hard-nosed about weighing the documented outcomes of the current project to expand technological literacy . . . against the great expectations we continue to have as teachers: our belief that literacy instruction makes life more fulfilling, more clearly informed by democratic and humanistic values for the human beings we teach” (161). For Selfe, the means by which educators may resist the power hierarchies and social inequality that are inscribed and transmitted through the digital interface is to inscribe technology with a counter ideology, namely democratic humanism.

Published in 1999, Technology and Literacy’s emphasis upon resisting power and inequality through democratic humanist values and practices would, like her mandate to writing
instructors to pay attention to their technology use, be repeatedly inscribed in future composition studies scholarship. Indeed, Selfe’s emphasis upon engaging digital media through the lens of democratic humanist values takes on a certain degree of disciplinarity in Technology and Literacy in that, as in “The Politics of the Interface,” Selfe identifies a need for writing instructors to receive increased training that focuses on the intersect between technology and literacy. According to Selfe in Technology and Literacy, this training would take place during both graduate study and actual service as writing instructors, and it would seek to make instructors more than users of technology, encompassing “the areas of technology criticism, social theory, and computer studies” (156). Despite questions regarding the efficacy of Selfe’s understanding of the role of democratic humanism in the practice of paying attention to technology as a response to government surveillance, questions that are considered in depth in Chapters III and IV, Selfe’s scholarship in the 1990s has played an enormously influential role in shaping composition studies’ discourse regarding the implications of digital learning technologies in writing studies, and her emphasis upon paying attention to technology use and cultivating digital composing perspectives and practices that foster democratic humanist values are felt in much of the digital writing and rhetoric scholarship that has been published since, including this thesis.

Part Two: 2000s Considerations of Technoliteracy in the Scholarship of Stephanie Vie, Ryan Moeller, Mya Poe and Simson Garfinkel

Stephanie Vie’s 2008 article, “Digital Divide 2.0: ‘Generation M’ and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom,” begins by crediting Selfe’s Technology and Literacy for “urging us to ‘pay attention’ to technology” and its effects on users (Vie 10). Like Selfe, Vie is concerned with the potential for technology in the writing classroom to reinscribe
societal inequalities onto users. As Selfe did in *Technology and Literacy*, Vie provides an overview of national techno-literacy initiatives in the United States and suggests that these initiatives reinscribe traditional power structures on users by “preparing [students] for immersion into a capitalistic society” (10). Vie goes on to invoke Selfe’s call to writing instructors to “pay attention” to their technology use in the classroom in order to combat the inequalities that such technology embodies (10). However, whereas a significant portion of Selfe’s argument relates to ensuring equal access to digital technologies, Vie argues that students have since achieved a level of access to digital technologies that often exceeds that of their writing instructors (10, 12). In this assertion, Vie echoes the NCTE’s “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies,” which suggests that one of the great challenges facing composition instructors is keeping pace with their students’ comfort level with digital composing resources. However, unlike the majority of such position statements, Vie builds upon Selfe and earlier digital literacy scholars’ emphasis upon the potential for the digital interface to reinscribe cultural values such as racism (Faigley 189) and “sexism . . . and colonialism” (Selfe and Selfe 484), arguing that students’ increased comfort level with digital technologies does not necessarily mean students are equipped to use digital technology critically or “that they can understand and critique technology’s societal effects” (12).

According to Vie, the instructor’s role in the digital age is to incorporate instruction on digital technologies such as social media in order to facilitate students’ more critical understanding of their relationship to such technologies. To this end, Vie places significant emphasis on the need for instructors to help students understand the role of “digital intellectual property issues” in the new media landscape (14), and Vie is also concerned with the potential for social networking sites, when used as pedagogical tools, to exploit students by subjecting
them to endless advertising (16) and even surveillance (18). Vie’s 2008 discussion of the threat of surveillance that accompanies users’ interfacing with social networking sites foreshadows her later work in the 2016 web text, “How Are We Tracked Once We Press Play?,” in which Vie and Jennifer deWinter investigate the extent to which online gaming’s surveillance of users threatens individual agency and asks readers to consider future strategies through which users may protect their data by opting out of data collection.

Interestingly, whereas previous digital literacy scholars tended to characterize the presence of surveillance in the writing classroom as a harmful, exploitative practice, Vie suggests that increased surveillance between students and instructors through social media may actually foster a more democratic space because students are given the unprecedented opportunity to surveil their own instructors (19). The situation Vie outlines stands in contrast to Hawisher and Selfe’s 1991 assertion that, “[a]lthough panoptic space differs from electronic bulletin boards and conferences in that students, unlike Bentham’s inmates, can converse with one another over networks, those who have conversed over computers will recognize how eavesdropping and watching are made easy through the architecture of an electronic network” (63). Whereas Hawisher and Selfe compare students to prisoners who are trapped and monitored within the networked digital interface, Vie argues that “[o]nline social networking sites showcase an intriguing turn of events wherein students’ scrutiny of their instructors inverts traditional notions of classroom surveillance” (19). In other words, as instructors participate more and more in social networking, they accept the possibility that students may be observing them in the digital sphere, a situation that reverses the traditional distribution of power in the writing classroom, in which instructors are positioned as the agents of surveillance and students are compelled to submit to being surveilled, a student/teacher relationship that serves to naturalize
the practice of surveillance in interesting ways, especially in light of the discourse currently
surrounding the U.S. government’s surveillance of its own citizens. In both situations, a source
of institutional authority (teacher/NSA) assumes and then exercises its assumed power to
monitor its charge (students/citizens). Furthermore, just as students, according to Vie, have the
opportunity to level the playing the field by surveilling their instructors via social media, citizens
have the opportunity to learn more about the government’s surveillance practices via digital
news outlets such as The Guardian and The Washington Post.

However, one key difference between the students’ surveillance of their instructors
through social media that Vie describes and citizens’ consideration of the government’s
surveillance practices is that the penalties for U.S. citizens who leak information to news outlets,
as Snowden did, are severe; whereas there is likely nothing illegal in students reviewing their
instructors’ Facebook accounts. Furthermore, Vie’s argument that students’ use of social media
may foster greater “participatory democracy” within the classroom is significantly complicated
by the fact that, according to Snowden’s 2013 leaks, Facebook is one of the web companies
whose servers are being accessed by the NSA in order to collect user data under Section 702 of
FISA (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill). The presence of government
surveillance significantly complicates, not only Vie’s arguments concerning the use of digital
interfaces to cultivate democracy, but many of the arguments forwarded by digital literacy
scholars regarding the relationship between digital literacy and democratic humanism.6

Published in 2008, Vie’s work reflects composition studies’ continued concern with the
ideological implications of digital technology for writing studies scholarship and practice and
illustrates the continued influence of Cynthia Selfe and other early digital literacy scholars.

6 Such complications are explored in depth in Chapters III and IV.
Like Vie, Ryan M. Moeller builds upon Selfe’s research by exploring how the digital interface’s presence within higher education obliges educators to reevaluate digital technologies’ effects on student agency, as well as the potential for digital technologies to reinforce preexisting inequities and facilitate varying forms of surveillance. However, whereas Vie concentrates on the implications of social media for writing instruction, Moeller instead explores the ideological and ethical implications of wi-fi technology on college campuses and society in general. In his 2009 “Rewriting Wi-Fi: The Surveillance of Mobility and Student Agency,” Moeller argues that the rise of mobile telecommunications technologies has led to increased surveillance of students by both technology companies and the universities themselves. Beginning with Hawisher and Selfe’s argument “that networked computer access to student writing” may compromise student agency (Moeller 70), Moeller calls for educators to adopt a social-epistemic model of rhetoric in order to help students to understand how they contribute to and are affected by the wireless technologies and wireless practices of the discourse communities they currently participate in and may join in the future (71). Toward this end, Moeller conducts rhetorical analyses of advertising campaigns conducted by Intel Corporation, IBM and Nokia in order to demonstrate that technology companies frequently construct wi-fi technologies as facilitating greater productivity (72-74).

As Moeller explains, Intel targets employers by suggesting that wi-fi will increase worker productivity (72); IBM targets the employees, themselves, by suggesting that wireless technology will increase mobility and, therefore, productivity (72-73), and Nokia appeals to university administrators by promising more productivity amongst students and educators, alike (73-74). Moeller argues that the corporate discourse surrounding wireless technologies threatens human agency: “The result . . . of the limitations that the wireless industry places on wi-fi—
whether they reconceptualize the workplace as being *everywhere* or consumerism as a primary human activity—is that they severely limit users’ agency” (73). Moeller’s suspicion toward the promises made by wireless companies to users is reminiscent of earlier digital writing scholars’ suspicion toward the utopian promises of digital technology as a whole. Moeller’s argument hearkens back to Hawisher and Selfe’s critique of “the uncritical enthusiasm that frequently characterizes the reports of those of us who advocate and support electronic writing classes” (56), as well as Faigley’s gradual realization that the “sharing of classroom authority” that digital discussion forums enabled in his classroom came to reinscribe some of the very social inequities he had hoped to escape through digital learning (“The Achieved Utopia” 182-189). Likewise, Selfe and Selfe assert that “[a]n overly optimistic vision of technology is not only reductive, . . . it is also dangerous in that it renders less visible the negative contributions of technology that may work potently and effectively against critically reflective habits efforts [*sic*] of good teachers and students” (482). The ever-expanding reach of wireless technology advocated by the advertisements Moeller examines, combined with Intell, IBM and Nokia’s conflation of wireless access with increased productivity serve to expand the workplace and classroom outside of their traditional, physical locations, thereby increasing demands on employees and students.

Another risk of increased wireless technology is, according to Moeller, the danger that users’ data will be tracked for marketing purposes, thereby subjecting users to ongoing corporate surveillance. Moeller writes,

Advertised as a value-added feature to the consumer, as in the case of saving ‘favorite’ settings, such market research is nearly invisible and totally efficient. . . . As the consumer electronics products that will organize and distribute our *entertainment* and
leisure through wi-fi are developed, consumers will influence the industry passively by letting it track their individual use. (75)

Foreshadowing research that would be completed several years later by Beck, McKee and Reyman, Moeller argues that the increased use of wireless technologies creates greater opportunities for companies to track user data. Furthermore, Moeller describes how institutions of higher education also engage in surveillance of students’ wi-fi use in order to monitor and prevent threats to system security (80). Ultimately, Moeller argues that it is up to writing instructors to foster self-aware discourse communities within their classrooms, in which students actively analyze the digital, wireless conditions of the discourse communities in which they are being asked to compose (81). Moeller’s examination of the internet surveillance conducted by technology companies and institutions of higher education reiterates Hawisher, Selfe and Selfe’s calls for increased attention to the potential digital learning technologies have to compromise student agency.

Like Moeller, Mya Poe and Simson Garfinkel are concerned with the potential for wireless technologies to exacerbate problems facing students, such as the risk of students’ data being monitored. In their 2009, “Security and Privacy in the Wireless Classroom,” Poe and Garfinkel argue that institutions of higher education and Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), in particular, must work to clarify campus wireless network policies in order to protect students and their data (180-181). Whereas previous scholars tend to locate the threat of student surveillance amongst corporations, educators and/or administrators, Poe and Garfinkel discuss the threat students may pose to each other in the form of hacking (181-182), “rogue” wireless networks (186-188), harassment online (188-189) and students interfering with the work of classmates and instructors by denying them internet service or misdirecting web searches to
unintended sites (189). Significantly, Poe and Garfinkel write that “these days international students also have reason to be concerned about covert monitoring. For example, a list of websites visited by a foreign student might be given to authorities with the notation that the student was visiting websites belonging to militant organizations” (188). Though referring to the possibility that an international student may be surveilled by another student, with the result that the former’s digital data is exposed to law enforcement agencies, Poe and Garfinkel foreshadow what would only become a greater concern on the part of composition studies scholars regarding the threat of surveillance, especially in regards to the threat of government surveillance in light of Snowden’s 2013 leaks. Indeed, given FISA’s emphasis upon surveilling non-U.S. citizens located outside the United States, it follows that international students’ digital data may be at greater risk, given the increased likelihood of international correspondence.

Rather than focusing on the threat of surveillance posed by the United States government, Poe and Garfinkel appeal to the federal government’s regulations as a measure against which the success of campus wireless networking policies may be assessed.

Although the security of the wireless network at large is the responsibility of computer services, writing programs can help ensure that the university is living up to its responsibilities. Our experience indicates that many universities are not, despite the fact that their networks are being used to transmit information that is entitled to the highest level of protection under both Federal law and the information policies of most universities. It is disturbing that students are being asked to use wireless networks without being given the assurance that their legal rights are being met. (190)

Poe and Garfinkel call to writing programs and university administrators to foster more transparent, efficient wireless networking policies, and their appeal to Federal law as a barometer
for the success of those policies foreshadow claims that would later be made by McKee and Reyman. Like McKee and Reyman, Poe and Garfinkel assert that one of the first steps toward increasing the security and privacy of student data is to begin to understand and simplify the “convoluted, legalese prose” that governs the use of internet technologies on campus (192). Toward this end, Poe and Garfinkel, echoing Moeller’s emphasis upon engaging social epistemic pedagogy to foster more digitally aware classroom discourse communities, suggest that writing instructors may ask students to study and analyze the policies, themselves (191-193). Furthermore, in the tradition of Selfe’s call to writing instructors to pay closer attention to the ideological underpinnings of their technology use, Poe and Garfinkel call for WPAs and instructors to create a campus climate that encourages “ethical wireless computing” (193). This call for an ethics of wireless, networked computer usage echoes Selfe’s earlier calls for writing instructors to pay critical attention to the ethical and ideological implications of their technology use in the classroom.

However, the recommendations that Poe and Garfinkel present to writing programs and university administrators do not constitute strategies that will help students and other users of digital media resist the surveillance being conducted by the federal government. Admittedly, Poe and Garfinkel’s focus is not on responding to and avoiding government surveillance, specifically, but doing so with surveillance that is committed by students against students. However, the problem remains that Poe and Garfinkel’s appeal to federal regulation as a means by which institutions of higher education may evaluate the effectiveness of their own networking policies is significantly complicated by the fact that the government has effectively legalized the surveillance of its own citizens, thereby creating a legal framework that risks violating citizens’ constitutional rights, namely their rights under the Fourth Amendment. As a result, appeals to the
Federal government such as the ones made by Poe and Garfinkel and, later, McKee and Reyman must be reevaluated in light of the central role agencies within that government play in surveilling U.S. citizens. Furthermore, Poe and Garfinkel’s recommendation, along with Moeller’s, that writing instructors assign students the task of analyzing universities’ wireless network policies would likely not be an effective strategy through which writing instructors may respond to the threat of government surveillance. Given the secrecy in which NSA surveillance and the PRISM program are enshrouded, it may be impossible for instructors and students to arrive at a clear understanding of how such surveillance operates. However, despite the difficulty with which Poe and Garfinkel’s recommendations might be used as a basis for responding to NSA surveillance, the concern they express regarding the threat of surveillance facing students would continue to grow within the composition studies community as the field entered the 2010s, and the decade of Edward Snowden’s leaks.

Part Three: 2010s Considerations of Technoliteracy in the Scholarship of Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Heidi McKee, Tara Robbins Fee, Jessica Reyman, Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, Adam Banks and Estee Beck

In his 2010 essay, “Among Texts,” Johndan Johnson-Eilola provides a detailed overview of the Western world’s transition from non-networked texts to ones that are networked and semi-autonomous, and Johnson-Eilola explores both the benefits and possible dangers networked texts pose to writing instructors and the world. In many ways, “Among Texts” represents both a culmination of previous digital writing scholarship and a strong nudge in which writing studies scholars are asked to take their research in a new direction, one in which notions of democratic humanism are not quite so taken for granted. Johnson-Eilola begins “Among Texts” by suggesting that much of the current debate unfolding regarding literacy is not new, and is not
limited to discussions of digital technologies: “The meaning of texts has long been contentious—not merely the literal meaning of books as objects, but the social meaning of literacy itself” (34). Even centuries ago, there were examples of human beings attempting to transform the ways in which information can be accessed with the goal of making access faster and more convenient, especially “in support of intellectual work” (35-37). For example, Johnson-Eilola describes the “book-wheel” as one early effort amongst scholars to streamline and control how information is accessed, a mechanism in which a scholar would insert several books into a large wheel and then turn the wheel so that they could access several books in rapid succession (Johnson-Eilola 36). While later attempts at controlling information would become more sophisticated, Johnson-Eilola suggests that even early attempts to control information like the book wheel represent attempts “to not simply appreciate texts but also to put them to work” (37). As Johnson-Eilola shifts his focus to networked digital texts, he examines how human engagement with such texts may rupture traditional notions of agency.

Johnson-Eilola asks readers to consider what it means for literacy when the digital networked texts with which users interact are not passive, but “actively social,” possessing their own “intentions and agency” (37). Johnson-Eilola is not suggesting that writers and readers have no agency, but only saying that the whole issue gains an extra level of intractable complexity when texts themselves are not merely out there, as objects, but also in motion, gathering other texts around them, responding to their environments in ways both simple and complex, making connections that their authors or readers are participants in, rather than simple agents of—intertextuality with teeth. (37)
This growth of agency amongst digital objects has, according to Johnson-Eilola, been largely overlooked by writing studies scholars because cultural expectations surrounding “the idea of texts as agents” tend to fixate on more overt manifestations of such agency such as artificial intelligence (37). The consequence of this fixation on external signs of object-oriented agency is that technology users are often oblivious to ways in which common digital interfaces like “databases, computer forms, video games, and many other things we regard provisionally as texts have already begun to gain agency” and may even “record some small portion of our actions” (37). In other words, as technology creators have come to manufacture increasingly user-respondent digital interfaces, the agency of users has come to be increasingly jeopardized in so far as digital interfaces act upon users in often invisible, perhaps uncontrollable ways. Much of this jeopardized agency hearkens back to cautionary statements made by Hawisher and Selfe regarding the potential for digital technology to enable increased monitoring of users through its very structure (63), as well as Selfe and Selfe regarding the potential for social inequities and non-inclusive cultural assumptions to be embodied in the structure of digital technology (484-486).

Johnson-Eilola explores this increase of agency on the part of digital interfaces through the language of the spime. According to Johnson-Eilola, spimes constitute “a shift toward semiautonomy” for the digital interface, in which such interfaces “communicate about themselves, gathering data about use and then sending and receiving data from a larger network” (44). Examples of “near spimes” include “cell phones and computers . . . because in some cases they are able to gather data about their surroundings . . . and then communicate that data automatically to other locations while downloading new information at the same time” (44). Just as the structure of the book wheel enabled scholars to produce and access information more
quickly, the spime speeds up information sharing by connecting the digital interface to yet other interfaces, between which information is shared. Indeed, the networked nature of spimes is so pervasive throughout digital technology that “[s]uch uses seem relatively routine at times” (44). Despite the potential for networked digital technologies such as the spime to rupture traditional notions of human agency, Johnson-Eilola explores the benefits such tracking can provide. For instance, Johnson-Eilola surveys examples of academic labor, including “calls for papers, submission guidelines,” “video and audio feeds and clips” (47) and even “working drafts of articles, chapters, presentations” and describes how spimes, as networked technology, stand to create “an information bridge across the spaces separating these disparate bits of information” (48). Johnson-Eilola suggests that networked technology stands to make it easier for scholars to locate a variety of information for their projects as well as receive feedback and collaborate with peers. As such, spimes might be seen as simply enabling educators and students to accomplish digitally the tasks they would otherwise be completing face-to-face or through non-digital means such as the postal service.

However, despite the benefits afforded by networked digital technology such as spimes, Johnson-Eilola also addresses the risks that arise as a result of its use, namely that of users being subjected to involuntary surveillance. Johnson-Eilola states that, “although many users of the Web are not aware of it, most traffic on the Web is tracked in a multitude of ways, even outside of covert government surveillance” (52). Citing tracking tools such as Google Analytics and even institutions’ practice of assigning computers “semistatic addresses that make connecting this data to a specific user fairly simple,” Johnson-Eilola raises the specter that the very act of accessing the Web, a commonplace in today’s writing classroom, puts one at risk of involuntary, secret surveillance (52). Indeed, according to Johnson-Eilola, such tracking of students is routine
on college campuses, as, “within the context of teaching, most courseware allows instructors to track” students activities within the Course Management System (CMS), suggesting that the surveillance perpetrated by corporations and the government is merely a more elaborate incarnation of the surveillance practices already committed by instructors (52). Given the great promises and dangers of networked technology, Johnson-Eilola calls for increased caution regarding the implementation of such technologies on campus, suggesting that “not enough attention is being paid to issues of online privacy” (52). Echoing the words of Selfe, Johnson-Eilola reminds instructors that “[t]echnologies are neither neutral carriers of intentions nor completely autonomous agents. Instead, technologies are articulations: ongoing, collaborative constructions being played out functionally, socially, and politically” (53). While the complex interfaces created by networked technologies may feel overwhelming to instructors, Johnson-Eilola reminds instructors that they retain a certain degree of control and, by implication, responsibility to ensure that they are using and assigning technologies in ways that are ethical for themselves and their students. However, despite Johnson-Eilola’s reassurances, “Among Texts” represents a turning point in composition studies scholarship, in which traditional assumptions regarding human agency have come to be scrutinized rather than embraced as a priori values.

In the 2011 article, “Policy Matters Now and in the Future: Net Neutrality, Corporate Data Mining, and Government Surveillance,” Heidi A. McKee expands on Hawisher and Selfe’s 1991 warning that “eavesdropping and watching are made easy through the architecture of an electronic network” by examining the threat of surveillance that accompanies engagement with the digital interface (63). In another illustration of Selfe’s influence on the shape and trajectory of technoliteracy discourse within composition studies, McKee begins by referencing Technology and Literacy in order to argue that educators “need . . . to pay attention to policy” as
it pertains to institutions, organizations, companies and the government’s control over the technologies writing studies professionals use and ask their students to use (277). To not pay attention risks creating a future in which the internet is “completely controlled by corporations with what user-generated content there is being packaged by commercial sites and closely watched by government agents” (McKee 277). McKee’s statement is disturbingly prophetic when read in light of Snowden’s 2013 leaks documenting the PRISM program, as well as in light of the ambiguity and secrecy contained within Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act examined in Chapter I. Published approximately two years prior to Snowden’s 2013 leaks, McKee warns of a situation that is strikingly similar to what digital technology users, including writing educators and students, face today, one in which agencies in the U.S. government access user information that is stored on web companies’ servers.

Just as McKee’s description of a nightmare future in which citizens’ internet use is dominated by commercial interests and government surveillance echoes Hawisher and Selfe’s fears regarding the ease with which digital technology users’ data may be tracked (63), it also echoes Selfe and Selfe’s assertion that the computer interface embodies cultural values and ideologies, such as capitalism and class inequality (486). Likewise, just as Selfe and Selfe were concerned about the possibility that users would have unequal access to the internet due to the high cost of software installation and use (488), McKee warns that a lack of strong federal regulation may lead Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide “paid prioritization,” in which the speed of access for certain websites would be increased as a result of the owners of those websites paying extra (279). Even now, it is commonplace for internet service providers to charge increased rates for increased internet speeds. However, the practice of paid prioritization, if adopted, would compound such unequal access by speeding up or slowing down websites
based, not on how much the user is willing to pay, but on how much the website itself is willing to pay ISPs in order to increase the speed and, therefore, ease of its accessibility to users. As with Selfe and Selfe, McKee fears that corporate interests will threaten the freedom of technology users and constitute a threat to an open internet.

In addition to exploring issues related to paid prioritization, McKee also investigates the potential for student data to be collected and privacy compromised through internet resources that are routinely assigned in college writing courses, e.g. Prezi, Google and YouTube (280-281). Because “Policy Matters Now and in the Future” was published in 2011, McKee’s article does not consider the likelihood that, in addition to such companies’ own surveillance practices, the NSA was also collecting user information directly from the servers of major web companies such as Google and YouTube, with “‘98 percent of PRISM production based on Yahoo, Google and Microsoft,’” according to presentation notes that are included in the PowerPoint slides leaked by Snowden in 2013 (Gellman and Poitras). However, even without this knowledge, McKee identifies the risk that student data may be tracked by the federal government as a result of government initiatives like the Patriot Act (286). Furthermore, McKee examines how legislation such as the Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA) enable the federal government to obtain “all online communications such as e-mails that exist on a company’s remote server unread for more than 180 days” without a warrant (285). Indeed, McKee states that, “[a]ccording to current law any document uploaded to a remote server is considered immediately available for law enforcement to view. . . . no warrant needed” (285). According to McKee, such legislation ensures that “anything we [educators and students] say or do online may be viewed by the government and be part of a law enforcement or Homeland Security investigation” (286). McKee suggests that, despite the often implicitly public nature of online engagement, students and
educators who are not overly familiar with how digital interfaces operate, indeed, how
corporations and government entities may exploit such interfaces to surveil users, may not
understand the risk they are putting themselves in as they interact with digital interfaces.

Like Johnson-Eilola’s “Among Texts,” McKee’s “Policy Matters Now and in the Future”
dresses the digital interface and its implications for writing instructors and students in ways
that had not been explored in much depth in previous digital writing scholarship. However, many
of the problems McKee identifies in regards to the digital interface reflect more focused
explorations of issues raised by Hawisher, Selfe and Selfe in the 1990s, the greatest problem
being the increased threat of surveillance that accompanies the use of digital networked
interfaces. Indeed, despite the insidious forms taken by the surveillance McKee describes, forms
that implicate both web companies and the federal government, itself, the recommended
responses to these threats McKee proposes have much in common with those forwarded by early
digital literacy scholars and Selfe and Selfe, in particular. First, McKee suggests that writing
studies professionals develop an awareness of how their own techno-literacy practices intersect
with company and government policies and practices in ways that may jeopardize their own
privacy and that of students (287). Next, McKee argues that writing programs need greater
emphasis upon techno-literacy, in general, and that instructors should create activities and
assignments for students in which they investigate issues related to technology use, such as
websites’ privacy polies (287-288). Finally, McKee argues that writing studies professionals
should foster public discussion on issues of techno-literacy and mobilize the professional entities
of college writing to influence government initiatives (288-289). Like Selfe and Selfe, McKee is
concerned with the ways in which classroom technology may intersect with economic, social and
political contexts to promote a loss of student freedom. However, McKee helps to expand Selfe
and Selfe’s conversation to include the issue of loss of student privacy that results from the threat of government surveillance, specifically.

Whereas many composition studies scholars, such as McKee, Johnson-Eilola, Moeller, Poe, Garfinkel, Faigley, Hawisher and Selfe, have produced research that evaluates the presence of the digital interface primarily as a threat in the face of which educators must display great caution, there is another current within composition studies scholarship that positions networked technology primarily as a source of great benefit to the writing classroom. This latter perspective is embodied in Vie’s aforementioned 2008 assertion that students’ ability to surveil their instructors through social networking sites may help to “topple traditional classroom hierarchies of power in unpredictable ways” (19). Furthermore, even scholars such as Faigley and Johnson-Eilola are torn between the threats posed by digital technology and the benefits such technology can provide to educators and students.

The benefits of the digital interface in the writing classroom are explored even further by Tara Robbins Fee in her article, “Computer Surveillance in the Classroom; or, How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Panopticon,” in which she emphasizes the benefits of networked technology and even goes so far as to praise instructor surveillance of students. Fee describes her experiment of installing Remote Desktop software on the computers of her writing classroom, “a widely available and inexpensive application that ... conveniently permits an instructor to view the screens of other users from a lectern monitor” (378). Fee felt initial hesitation at employing what amounted to a digital panopticon, and she describes how early classroom uses of Remote Desktop took the form of alerts sent to the screen of a distracted student, as well as shutting off the computer of a student due to unauthorized use (378). However, as the term progressed, Fee reports that her pervasive practice of surveillance resulted in several benefits for students. For
instance, Remote Desktop allowed Fee to monitor students’ typed responses during activities, which Fee would then use as a basis for calling on students to share during class discussion (379). Whereas Hawisher and Selfe express concern for the potential of classroom technology to compromise the agency of students by reinforcing a traditional teacher-centered power structure within the writing classroom (61), Fee argues that her application of Remote Desktop and her continued surveillance of students enabled her to accomplish the exact opposite. Fee writes, “Paradoxically, Remote Desktop gave [her] the ability to direct the discussion by having students do more of the talking” (379). According to Fee, her ability to monitor her students through the surveillance software, Remote Desktop, actually allowed her to save time by enabling her to “scan the work of the whole class and wander over to various students’ desks, rather than having to collect, grade, comment on, and return a whole class set before the student had my response” (380). In this passage, Fee suggests that her use of digital classroom surveillance allowed her to accomplish with ease, digitally, what instructors traditionally do through print text, namely assign, collect and evaluate student writing. Significantly, Fee draws attention to the fact that surveillance is already a deeply-imbedded, sanctioned aspect of the writing classroom as manifested in the form of instructor-student feedback and grading. What Remote Desktop allows Fee to do is accomplish this oversight in a more efficient manner. As such, digital surveillance in the writing classroom is, as Johnson-Eilola suggested approximately two years earlier, not as new or innovative as one might think. Indeed, Fee draws attention to the pervasive nature of surveillance and serves to complicate the scholarly conversation regarding such classroom practices by asserting that they reinforce rather than weaken student agency.

Like Fee, Jessica Reyman is concerned with implications of surveillance for the teaching of college writing. However, whereas scholars such as Fee and Vie emphasize beneficial aspects
of digital surveillance, such as increased instructor ability to facilitate student learning and even the enabling of students to monitor instructors via social media, Reyman is concerned with the potential for citizens’ privacy to be compromised through their online behavior when that behavior is tracked by entities existing outside the classroom walls. Published in 2013, Reyman’s “User Data on the Social Web: Authorship, Agency, and Appropriation,” picks up the discussion where McKee left off by continuing to examine the implications of surveillance practices for writing educators and students by outlining the threat that data mining poses to students, faculty and administrators, as well as the country as a whole (517). Significantly, Reyman explores the implications of surveillance practices such as data mining for user agency, suggesting that, while human beings still retain a certain degree of agency as they interact with digital interfaces, agency is not a uniquely human attribute, but is shared with the digital interfaces, themselves.

Like McKee, Hawisher, Selfe, Selfe and Johnson-Eilola, Reyman argues that the increasingly interconnected nature of telecommunications demands that users see themselves, not as isolated authors, but as collectively generating complex web-based data, a process of creation over which users have less and less control. Reyman writes, “As users produce data through interactions within social and participatory Web services, they are acting neither as autonomous composing agents nor as mere bystanders in the generation of a technology by-product. Rather, they are working collaboratively with other users, texts, and technologies to create content, form networks, and, ultimately, write the social Web” (516). By positioning users of web-based technologies as being more than “mere bystanders,” Reyman hints at the great responsibility instructors take on every time they use and assign such technologies, because the very act of engaging with a digital interface implicates a user in the cultural values and practices embodied in the interface (516). Yet, Reyman’s seemingly contradictory assertion that web users
are not “autonomous composing agents” (516) hearkens back to Johnson-Eilola’s claim that networked texts possess “intentions and agency . . . , making connections that their authors or readers are participants in, rather than simple agents of” (37). Johnson-Eilola and Reyman’s research draws attention to the potential for the networked digital interface to rupture, if only in part, traditional assumptions regarding human agency and autonomy even to the point of imbuing digital objects themselves with agency. Estee Beck will explore the potential for digital objects to embody agency in even more depth in 2015 by considering ways in which object-oriented ontology may help composition studies scholars more fully appreciate the power of digital objects to influence human existence.

Reyman proceeds to outline companies who have engaged in the practice of data-mining, names that include Amazon, Target, Google and Facebook (517-518). Like McKee, Reyman is concerned with users’ ability to understand web companies’ terms of use and privacy policies, and observes that such companies provide users with “lengthy and complicated terms-of-use agreements” that are virtually impossible for the average user to read and understand; yet the presence of such agreements helps companies to create the illusion of informed consent on the part of users, as though users accept having their data tracked in exchange for access to the web-based technology (521). What is at stake in these exchanges is how individual agency is defined, as “[s]uch appropriation is based on the assumptions that data as property is separable and unique from individual users’ creative activities on the social and participatory Web . . . ,” a view that allows companies to justify their ownership of any data generated by users on the web (524). However, Reyman argues that, despite the fact that user data is being generated largely through the activity of “nonhuman agents . . . technological agency is intertwined and articulated with human agency at key stages” (526). In other words, even though digital objects have taken on
agency in their influence upon and manipulation of users’ digital data, the means by which such objects operate is, to some extent, still mediated by digital designers (Reyman 526). Furthermore, the collection and application of digital data is facilitated by human users at key points along that data’s composition process, thus making users “collaborative agents in generating data” (Reyman 526). As such, human beings may continue to retain a certain degree of agency even as the agency of the digital interface increases.

Indeed, it is the presence and extent of human agency that Reyman is most concerned with and the inability to reduce the digital data being generated to mere technological processes. Furthermore, while Reyman explores the government’s potential to limit data mining (528-529), Reyman places the primary responsibility for conscious, ethical use and teaching of web-based technologies on the shoulders of English teachers (530). However, despite Reyman’s insistence that writing educators play a significant role in “educat[ing] ourselves, our colleagues, and our students about this unfair exchange system within many social Web environments,” a statement that echoes Selfe and other digital literacy scholars’ emphasis on paying attention to technology use, Reyman’s research draws attention to the increasingly tenuous nature of user and, by extension, instructor and student agency as digital texts come to be more commonplace even as the networked digital interface becomes more complex. The concern for how human agency is to be understood and negotiated in light of the increased agency of the networked digital interface is one that only intensified following Snowden’s 2013 leaks.

In the aftermath of Snowden’s disclosure of NSA materials that document an ongoing project of government surveillance, Estee Beck published her 2013 article, “Reflecting upon the Past, Sitting with the Present, and Charting our Future: Gail Hawisher and Cynthia. [sic] Selfe Discussing the Community of Computers & Composition,” in which she interviews Selfe and
Hawisher regarding the history of their work on the journal, *Computers and Composition*. Both Selfe and Hawisher began their work with the journal in the 1980s (Beck 350, 353), and they describe how emerging technologies like email helped them to collaborate on their work together (Beck 351, 353). During the interview, Selfe reemphasizes her arguments from earlier research, describing the increasingly complex sets of relations that emerged in the 1990s as the world became increasingly connected through rapidly evolving telecommunication systems, ushering in a new era of “transcapitalism” (Beck 351). Also, Selfe echoes *Technology and Literacy*’s argument for paying closer attention to technology use, stating that “[w]e must re-attend every time to technology and how we use it in our endeavors” (Beck 353). Significantly, Selfe reflects on the increasingly complex nature of telecommunications in today’s world, citing commonly used new media technologies like Google Hangout and Skype; however, despite the ability of these technologies to connect human beings, Selfe cautions that users must continue “paying attention to people, and how they interact and what’s happening” (Beck 352). Selfe’s assertion that educators must avoid unconsciously celebrating and embracing technology is reminiscent of her and Hawisher’s 1991 criticism of “the uncritical enthusiasm that frequently characterizes the reports of those of us who advocate and support electronic writing classes,” as such uncritical acceptance and application of technology risks reinscribing unwanted cultural values and practices (56). Despite the passage of approximately twenty-two years since the publication of “The Rhetoric of Technology,” Selfe continues to maintain her position “that writing instructors, by thinking critically and carefully about technology, can succeed in using it to improve the educational spaces we inhabit” (Hawisher and Selfe 64). As such, Selfe’s emphasis upon paying critical attention to one’s technology use continues to form an underlying mandate that guides her discussions of technoliteracy.
Selfe’s cautionary tone regarding the benefits and application of technology in writing studies is shared by Hawisher who, expanding on her arguments in “The Rhetoric of Technology,” identifies the protection of student privacy as one of the greatest challenges facing the field of computers and writing (Beck 356). Hawisher goes on to discuss “the recent surveillance problems that have been brought to light in this country” as sufficient reason for caution as writing professionals continue to “participate on social network sites, Gmail, or the myriad numbers of apps that can help us work with students but nevertheless spread our names, photos, conversations—and sometimes our students and ourselves’ most private moments—around the world” (356). Though Hawisher does not identify Snowden directly, the fact that Beck interviewed Hawisher in June 2013 (349), the same month The Guardian and The Washington Post published top secret information leaked by Snowden about the NSA’s PRISM program, suggests that Hawisher’s reference to “the recent surveillance problems that have been brought to light” likely refers to those illuminated by Snowden, himself (356). One may wonder, had Selfe been interviewed, not in May 2013, but after the PRISM documents had been leaked, what would her thoughts have been concerning the role of paying attention as a response to government surveillance practices that are largely secret and inaccessible (Beck 349). Regardless, Hawisher’s decision to address government surveillance in the same month of Snowden’s leaks represents an early, if not the first, instance of the composition studies community evaluating the future role of the digital interface within writing studies in light of NSA surveillance, specifically. As such, Hawisher’s words highlight what would be a growing challenge to traditional notions of educator and student agency, agency that is significantly jeopardized in light of the pervasive, covert nature of government surveillance.
Approximately two years following her interview with Selfe and Hawisher, Beck produced the 2015 article, “The Invisible Digital Identity: Assemblages in Digital Networks,” in which she expands on the issue of corporate and government surveillance that Hawisher raised previously. While much of “The Invisible Digital Identity” revisits problems and calls for action raised by earlier scholars, Beck’s research stands apart from earlier composition studies scholarship in that she addresses the threat of NSA surveillance, specifically (128). Furthermore, Beck outlines a new theoretical direction through which composition studies scholars might more effectively consider ways in which digital practices such as corporate surveillance renegotiate traditional notions of human agency: namely, the subsection of alien phenomenology known as object-oriented\textsuperscript{7} ontology (135-137). Ultimately, Beck outlines a series of recommendations for writing educators to begin to resist the surveillance practices that have become so pervasive across the web. However, despite Beck’s consideration of government surveillance and the benefits of adopting an object-oriented theoretical lens, “The Invisible Digital Identity” restricts the bulk of its investigation to companies’ data tracking practices on the web and, in the spirit of Selfe, ways in which writing instructors may better understand corporate surveillance on the web and, by helping their students understand, mitigate such practices, strategies that have questionable relevance in response to government surveillance practices that are legally inaccessible to the public.

According to Beck, digital surveillance, government or corporate, is interwoven with the creation of an “invisible digital identity,” in which consumers’ behavior on the web is tracked and often exploited (126). Beck writes that, in contrast with “our visible digital identity [which we view] as something we can somewhat regulate . . . [,] we also have an invisible digital

\textsuperscript{7}For the purposes of this thesis, and in the vein of Ian Bogost’s \textit{Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing}, the terms alien phenomenology and object-oriented ontology are occasionally used interchangeably, with object-oriented ontology constituting a sub-section housed with the larger framework of alien phenomenology.
identity constructed through third-party elements and tracking technologies” (126). Directly referencing and building upon Reyman’s earlier argument that instructors carry the brunt of the burden of educating students in conscious web use (Reyman 530), Beck argues that instructors who ask students to use web technology “have some responsibility to teach students about invisible digital identities, and how to become more informed about digital tracking, and how to possibly opt-out of behavior marketing” (126). Beck’s recommendation may seem a challenging one to composition studies scholars, especially considering that one of the primary goals of web sites’ largely invisible tracking practices is ensuring that users cannot detect such surveillance. However, Beck outlines several strategies with which educators and students may educate themselves regarding how their digital data is monitored and, armed with this information, make wiser decisions as they interact with digital interfaces in the future.

The primary strategy Beck offers by which instructors might foster these goals is “to educate our students, as in the words of Cynthia Selfe (1999), to pay attention to how companies track our movements online and how we may opt-out and be better informed about these practices” (127). As such, Beck’s foundational recommendation to writing educators is to resist digital surveillance by practicing Selfe’s recommendation in Technology and Literacy that writing professionals pay critical attention to their technological practices. Furthermore, Beck supplements Selfe’s mandate by outlining practical strategies through which teachers and students might gain greater control over their invisible identities on the web, effectively making the invisible less so.

Beck introduces readers to two helpful web resources: AboutAds.info and Ghostery. AboutAds.info is an informational website that “provides educational materials to consumers who want to learn more about cookies and various tracking technologies and serves as the hub for
opting-out of behavior advertising” (131). According to Beck, one of the most helpful features of AboutAds.info is that it allows users to run an “opt-out script” that enables them to “look at the participating companies with customizable ads” that are associated with a specific website being accessed through a specific browser “and then decide what to opt-out of from the site” (131). The benefit of this program is that it enables users to have greater control over their internet identity and how their data is used by companies. Like AboutAds.info, Ghostery educates users about the tracking practices occurring on the web pages they visit, but it improves on AboutAds.info by “provid[ing] users with real-time up-to-the-minute information about trackers per page” (133). Whereas AboutAds.info requires users to check website tracking practices through the AboutAds.info website, “Ghostery provides information to users when [sic] each page they click on while surfing the web” (133). By providing these web resources, Beck educates writing instructors regarding strategies by which they may better inform themselves of the ways their digital data is being tracked by web sites and companies, as well as methods for opting out of such tracking.

By advocating the integration of web tools like AboutAds.info and Ghostery into educators’ in-class assignments and activities, Beck takes the offensive against companies and government agencies who would seek to monitor and exploit user and, by extension, educator and student data. According to Beck, in light of the pervasive tracking of users’ online behavior, “the question becomes how might we best inform out students about the types of tracking technologies and invisible digital identities constructed by companies from web use?” (137). Beck asserts that instructors may use online tools such as Ghostery and AboutAds in order to educate students about how their digital data is tracked and help them to mitigate such tracking by making wiser decisions on the web. However, while Beck presents substantial information
about and strategies in response to companies’ tracking of online user data, Beck’s discussion of
the implications of and responses to government surveillance are less developed.

In addition to examining the threat corporations pose on the web as they surveil users’
digital data, Beck suggests that the federal government has also taken advantage of increased
online collaboration to conduct surveillance of users (128). Beck writes, “With the development
of leaks by Edward Snowden that revealed how the National Security Agency contracts with
telephone and social media companies for user data, it has become increasingly important for
people to know how governments, companies, and organizations may or may not participate in
the ‘mean world’ Internet” (128). Beck’s assertion that users must understand how the
government may be tracking the digital data they generate is given added salience in light of
Snowden’s revelations that the NSA has been taking user data directly from Microsoft, Yahoo,
Google, Facebook, PalTalk, AOL, Skype, YouTube and Apple’s systems (Gellman and Poitras;
Greenwald and MacAskill). Indeed, NSA surveillance represents a compounded instance of the
loss of privacy Beck fears: not only are web companies storing vast sums of user data, that data
then serves as an informational reservoir to be tapped directly by the federal government, its
drilling rig Section 702 of FISA, which is discussed in Chapter I: Part One of this thesis. Beck
goes on to discuss the NSA’s PRISM program, which is the name given to the process by which
the NSA accesses user data through web companies’ servers (130). Beck asserts that Snowden’s
leaks “revealed how much of user privacy is lost because of web tracking technologies” and then
argues that “[w]e may never be able to realize a web where tracking is not part of the package,
but being educated about tracking technologies and how to limit the data stored and shared helps
protect us, and ultimately our students, when we ask them to go online in the classroom” (130).
However, these references to NSA surveillance are the only such references that occur in “The Invisible Digital Identity.”

The recommendations Beck presents in response to surveillance practices make no mention of government surveillance, but focus solely on the surveillance practices of the websites themselves (137). Admittedly, it might be argued that identifying and minimizing individual web sites’ tracking practices through tools such as AboutAds.info and Ghostery would also minimize the federal government’s collection of user information by reducing the amount of user data stored on web companies’ servers. However, such an argument would overlook the fact that much of the government’s surveillance targets email exchanges, not just users’ digital tracking information, a practice that is suggested by Microsoft’s recently-filed lawsuit against the U.S. government to make its “users [privy] to the clandestine interception of their e-mails” under the company’s First Amendment right to free speech (Mehrotra, “Microsoft Allowed to Sue U.S. Government”). While Beck’s research helps to expand digital writing scholarship by drawing attention to the practice of government surveillance and the threat it may pose to users, she does not examine this threat in depth, but focuses, rather, on the more visible practices of corporate surveillance and ways in which instructors may educate themselves about such surveillance and, in turn, educate their students in order to encourage resistance of surveillance practices.

In addition to drawing greater, if limited, attention to the presence and threat of government surveillance in the digital realm, Beck contributes another insight to composition studies’ digital literacy scholarship: object-oriented ontology. In light of the increased agency of the digital objects with which educators and students routinely interact, Beck argues “that digital rhetoricians and digital writing teachers need a theory that places both objects and humans in the same ontological state that helps shift toward seeing objects as equal in force and weight as
humans” (135). Beck asserts that “[a]n OOR [object-oriented rhetoric] approach provides digital rhetoricians with an escape from the binary between humans and machines, and gives way to a network of all elements cast as objects or a flat ontology” (136). While Beck positions “object-oriented philosophy” as the domain of Graham Harman, she also draws from the work of Bogost, who examines object-oriented ontology as a form of the alien phenomenology referenced in Chapter I: Part Four of this thesis.

In *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost explains the concept of flat ontology addressed by Beck: “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally.* The funeral pure is not the same as the aardvark; the porceletta shell is not equivalent to the rugby ball. Not only is neither pair reducible to human encounter, but also neither is reducible to the other” (11). In light of Beck’s assertion “that digital rhetoricians and digital writing teachers need a theory that places both objects and humans in the same ontological state,” the flat-ontology described by Bogost would seem to accomplish such a goal (135). By envisioning all things as objects and by suggesting that all objects assert themselves through their existence, Bogost articulates a vision of decentered agency within the digital interface that was foreshadowed by previous composition studies scholars. For instance, Faigley states in his 1992 “The Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom,” “unsettling for traditional writing teachers is the vivid demonstration of the decentering of the subject in electronic discussions. When students in networked classrooms comment on previous electronic discussions, they frequently remark that they can remember what was said but not who said what” (191). Likewise, in his 2010, “Among Texts,” Johnson-Eilola states that “[i]t is one thing to read a multimedia, networked text with leaky boundaries; it is another to read a text that itself has intentions and agency that do not so much as leaks as roll like a river and babble like a brook” (37).
Furthermore, approximately one year after the publication of *Alien Phenomenology*, Reyman offers words of warning that human agency may be losing ground in her 2013 article, “User Data on the Social Web: Authorship, Agency, and Appropriation”:

According to the terms-of-use statements for social and participatory Web technologies, user data is not a product of a human agent; the only agency demonstrated in its generation is a nonhuman, technological system. If we grant sole agency to technological systems, we should understand clearly the potential implications of excluding human agency from this aspect of digital composition. (526)

In her 2013 interview with Beck, Selfe echoes Reyman’s concern, stating that “we can’t allow our technology to eclipse our concern for human beings” (352). Beyond these examples, many more can be found and have been reviewed in Chapter II in which digital writing scholars warn that digital technology can embody and reinscribe cultural values and practices in ways users of such technologies may not immediately recognize. Indeed, Beck’s discussion of object-oriented rhetoric as a language through which to discuss the ways in which digital interfaces exert influence over users is one of the most recent of many contributions to the ongoing conversation composition studies scholars are having regarding the role of human agency in light of the networked digital interface.

However, while Beck asserts that object-oriented rhetoric will enable composition studies scholars to better understand and respond to digital objects by placing such objects on a level ideological playing field with human beings, the strategies Beck extrapolates from object-oriented ontology serve to reinforce a narrative within composition studies in which human agency is positioned as a preservable category in light of the networked digital interface. Beck argues that educators may inform themselves and their students about the tracking practices of
digital objects by using web resources like AboutAds.info and Ghostery (137). Beck suggests that such resources enable educators and students to reverse the surveillance tendencies of digital interfaces: “With companies looking at us, we can also look at them and decide whether the companies who use third-party elements do so in a way that lines up with our notions of privacy and data sharing on the web. In effect, we develop agency as well as a new understanding of digital literacy—crucial steps that can lead to empowerment and protection in online spaces” (137). As discussed in Chapter IV, Beck’s emphasis upon human agency in the face of the agency of digital objects as suggested by object-oriented rhetoric overlooks certain implications of alien phenomenology as a theoretical lens through which to view digital practices. The question is not how do users of digital media retain their agency in the face of alien networked digital interfaces that enable corporate and government surveillance. Rather, the question is, are traditional notions of human agency tenable in light of the increasingly alien, networked nature of the digital interface. Furthermore, even if, through the resources Beck presents, users are able to defend their agency against corporate surveillance, the fact remains that government surveillance is secretive, and the resources Beck outlines such as AboutAds.info and Ghostery cannot tell users whether or not the government is tracking their digital data. Furthermore, the secretive nature of government surveillance raises the question of whether Selfe’s mandate to educators to pay attention to their technology use serves as an effective response to surveillance practices that are secret and rendered effectively invisible due to users’ inability to detect them.

In addition to Beck’s “The Invisible Identity,” Snowden’s 2013 revelations of NSA surveillance have elicited other responses from the composition studies’ community, even motivating Adam Banks to remark upon them at the 2015 CCCC Convention. In his 2015 CCCC Chair’s address, titled “Ain’t No Walls behind the Sky, Baby! Funk, Flight, Freedom,” Banks
states that how educators deal with issues of “privacy and surveillance” is a “crossroads moment for our scholarship” (274). According to Banks, the complications such practices present to the work of composition studies professionals demands a new, innovative response. Banks points to the importance of reaching beyond traditional scholarly approaches in order to understand the ways in which technology complicates traditional understandings of technoliteracy. He states that we need to take the next step in our investigations of technology issues far beyond the boxes and wires—that because writing, communication, composing, are always technologized, big picture technology studies need to become a crucial, a central part of what we do. It is time for some new journals and book series to take as big a leap forward now as *Kairos* and *Technoculture* and *Computers and Composition* did in their beginnings, journals and books series that are dedicated to exploring the messy big picture concerns that structure technologies and our relationships to them. (275)

Banks’ statement is significant for multiple reasons. First, Banks voices the concern that has been growing among previous composition studies scholars that the increasingly “technologized” nature of writing instruction demands increased attention to the complex networks with which educators and students interact through digital composition (275). Also, Banks calls for fresh, innovative scholarship that is willing to tackle such issues as government surveillance in their complexity, without reducing them to preconceived interpretations and understanding of technology and its relationship to users. Finally, Banks positions journals such as “*Kairos* and *Technoculture* and *Computers and Composition*” as once having been at the forefront of such disciplinary considerations (275). However, Banks’ use of the phrase “take as big a leap forward now” as such journals did in the past seems to imply that the work of *Kairos, Technoculture* and *Computers and Composition* is not keeping pace with the shifting complexities of technoliteracy.
In 2016, as though in response to Banks’ critique, *Kairos* published an entire issue devoted to some of the concerns Banks expresses in his address: namely the implications of surveillance for composition studies educators and administrators.

Though considered in Chapter I: Part Two, *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality* cannot be overemphasized in its significance as a pioneering work within composition studies scholarship of the digital. By considering the implications of corporate and government surveillance as it manifests in a variety of forms, ranging from the surveillance being conducted by the NSA (Beck) to surveillance practices that are imbedded in popular video games (Vie and deWinter), Beck, Crow, McKee, Reilly, deWinter, Vie, Gonzales and DeVoss focus attention on an ever-growing area of concern for writing professionals who frequently use and assign networked digital interfaces that subject users to surveillance practices. However, despite the innovative nature of all the scholarship contained within *Writing in an Age of Surveillance, Privacy, & Net Neutrality*, Beck’s contribution stands out as one of, if not the most recent work of composition studies scholarship that considers government surveillance, specifically, and its implications for how educators ask students to interact with the networked digital interface. However, as with her article, “The Invisible Digital Identity,” Estee Beck’s decision to extend Selfe’s call to pay attention as a response to government surveillance may require reevaluation in light of the secretive nature of government surveillance practices.

In “Writing Educator Responsibilities for Discussing the History and Practice of Surveillance [sic] & Privacy in Writing Classrooms,” Beck’s contribution to *Kairos*’ special issue, she provides an overview of common web-based technologies that track user data, thereby contributing to the creation of users’ “invisible digital identity.” Beck identifies Facebook, Amazon and Google as companies heavily involved in the collection of user data, yet she also
points out that the Course Management Systems, Blackboard and Canvas, also “use data analytics to track student engagement, including the amount of time logged into their systems and clicks across modules.” By providing this overview of common corporate and educational surveillance practices, Beck demonstrates that the practice of surveillance is not limited to the government or even the corporate world, but encompasses the majority of commonly used web resources. Beck also points out that Edward Snowden’s leaking of information concerning the NSA’s “telephone metadata collection” has sparked interest in the wider surveillance practices occurring throughout the internet. However, while Beck addresses the connection between Snowden and NSA surveillance, she does so more as a supplementary example of how pervasive digital surveillance in the United States has become.

As in “The Invisible Digital Identity,” Beck’s decision to identify government surveillance as a threat within “Writing Educator Responsibilities” helps to draw composition studies scholars’ attention to this growing problem. However, as in “The Invisible Digital Identity,” Beck does not dwell on the implications of NSA surveillance, specifically, for writing studies. To be sure, Beck adopts a stance of resistance by outlining countermeasures writing instructors might take in order to resist surveillance practices, in general. For instance, Beck suggests that instructors “have frank talks with our students, foremost, about how power and the potential for abuse occurs when any type of surveillance apparatus . . . embeds in any infrastructure where writing and communication happens.” Likewise, Beck reflects on the 2013 interview she conducted with Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher. In that interview, Selfe states that “[w]e must re-attend every time to technology, and how we use it in our endeavors” (Beck 353). Beck then states that, “[n]early fifteen years after Selfe’s work, I ask how educators are continuing to pay attention to technology in ways that explore digital surveillance and privacy in
connection with writing infrastructure.” Indeed, many of Beck’s recommendations help to enact Selfe’s call to writing professionals to pay attention to the increasingly complex nature of the digital interfaces with which students are asked to interact in the writing classroom. In addition to “frank talks” with students, Beck recommends instructors and students examine privacy policy statements for web programs, examine “data usage statements from large Internet companies” and create “multimodal public service announcements about the effects of surveillance and privacy upon the general public.”

However, despite Beck’s varied suggestions regarding how writing educators may help to educate students about issues related to surveillance and even encourage students to spread that awareness into the community, the bulk of Beck’s advice centers on types of surveillance that can be paid attention to by users, surveillance that is not, like many aspects of government surveillance, undetectable. To be sure, Beck advises readers that they make take steps toward resisting government surveillance by “supporting organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation or the American Civil Liberties Union in their efforts to fight corporate and government surveillance practices.” However, this suggestion leaves doubt concerning the role organizations like the EFF and ACLU may play in forcing the federal government to disclose surveillance operations that are concealed through legal frameworks such as FISA. ACLU officials Jameel Jaffer and Laura Murphy’s 2013 Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee have facilitated public engagement with the issue of government surveillance, but it is unclear how such engagement has enabled educators “to make [the] needed systemic changes in surveillance and privacy practices” Beck calls for in “Writing Educator Responsibilities.”
Part Four: Human Agency as a Problematized Category

Since 1991, digital literacy scholars within composition studies have been concerned with the potential for digital technology and practice within the networked writing classroom to create and perpetuate societal inequality and power structures. Despite the various time periods and backgrounds of the scholars reviewed in this chapter, their research is often dominated by a central concern, namely the need for writing professionals to preserve the human agency of their students in the face of agency-jeopardizing digital threats. Most recently, the digital threat to agency has taken the form of government surveillance, a practice that, given its covert nature, is practically undetectable, despite web companies such as Microsoft’s attempt to gain permission from the government to disclose to customers that they are being surveilled. In light of the secretive nature of the government’s digital surveillance of web users, it is uncertain whether traditional notions of human agency may be preserved as composition studies scholars have argued it should. It is possible that the decision to engage with a networked digital interface is also a decision to forfeit a certain amount of one’s agency. Indeed, even if one is not actively making the decision to sacrifice one’s agency by engaging with the digital realm, the architects of that realm may be making such a decision for the technology user. This question of agency lies at the heart of composition studies’ concern with the implications of the networked digital interface in the writing classroom and, most recently, its concern with government surveillance. However, the question of agency is one that scholars have not approached as a true question. Indeed, even before examining the question, composition studies had already formulated the answer.

If one of the dominating concerns of composition studies during the past twenty six years has been the question of student agency in light of the networked digital interface, then one of
the dominating perspectives through which this concern has been examined is the work of Cynthia Selfe. As this chapter demonstrates, from her 1991 work with Hawisher to her 2013 interview with Beck, Selfe has emphasized a singular message: the technologies used in the work of composition “may lead us unknowingly to assume positions of power that contradict our notions of good teaching” (Hawisher and Selfe 64), that, in other words, technologies “carry ideological freight” and, because digital interfaces are “non-innocent” (Selfe and Selfe 495), writing professionals “must re-attend every time to technology and how we use it in our endeavors” (Beck, “Reflecting upon the Past” 353). However, Selfe’s notion of paying critical attention to one’s technology use is partially problematized when such a mandate is applied to the current threat of government surveillance that faces composition studies. Namely, it is unclear how writing instructors are to pay attention to the ideological operations of government surveillance when the mechanisms of that surveillance are secret. Furthermore, in much the same way that digital interfaces are “non-innocent” in that they are wrapped up with ideology, Selfe’s notion of paying attention is founded upon an a priori belief in democratic humanism, especially insofar as Selfe advocates paying attention as a means by which writing professionals may protect their students’ human agency (Selfe and Selfe 495). As such, Selfe’s mandate to pay attention is also not innocent in that it embodies ideology.

Chapter III analyzes appeals to democratic humanism, especially appeals to human agency, as they occur in Selfe’s scholarship of the networked digital interface. By examining Selfe’s research through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, namely his theory of habitus, it is suggested that Selfe and, by extension, composition studies’ research on the implications of the digital interface in the writing classroom is structured by an a priori acceptance of democratic humanist values and human agency. Chapter III argues that Selfe’s correlation between paying attention
and cultivating human agency structures composition studies discourse of the digital in ways that risk circumscribing its consideration of government surveillance, a risk that is illustrated by Beck’s application of Selfe’s call to pay attention as a response to such surveillance. Ultimately, Chapter III suggests that the insidious, secretive nature of government surveillance may be such that the act of paying attention does not guarantee the increased agency of writing professionals or students.
CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS

Literacy educators need to become increasingly hard-nosed about weighing the documented outcomes of the current project to expand technological literacy . . . against the great expectations we continue to have as teachers: our belief that literacy instruction makes life more fulfilling, more clearly informed by democratic and humanistic values for the human beings we teach. (161)

-- Cynthia Selfe,  
*Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*

Cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation. (6)

-- Pierre Bourdieu,  
*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

Even when the state is resolutely liberal and democratic, it cannot do otherwise than become totalitarian. It becomes so either directly, or, as in the United States, through intermediate persons. (284)

-- Jacques Ellul,  
*The Technological Society*

As indicated in Chapter II, Banks’ 2015 Chair’s Address at the CCCC’s reflects upon the challenges facing the composition studies community today, challenges that include issues of racial discrimination, the ongoing exploitation of contingent faculty in higher education and, perhaps the challenge that is featured most prominently in Banks’ address, the implications of technology use in education (276). According to Banks, technology use in education raises “[q]uestions about privacy and surveillance, about policy and legal frameworks, about how technologies are marketed, about design, about networks, artificial intelligence, and natural language processing, just to begin the list” (274). These are some of the challenges Banks posits for writing studies professionals as they engage with increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces.
However, Banks also identifies an obstacle that stands in the way of writing professionals responding to and navigating these and other threats and challenges that are posed by new technologies. According to Banks, “One major obstacle we have to free ourselves from is the set of handcuffs the same old theory and the same old theorists and the same old scholarship place on us” (276). Admittedly, Banks’ primary critique of composition studies scholarship and the theory it employs is its tendency to reinscribe racial and gender inequities by giving greater representation to white male scholars and theorists (276-277). However, beyond issues of demographic inequality lies another, perhaps more fundamental problem—namely: composition studies scholarship that explores the implications of the digital interface is in need of a theoretical infusion. According to Banks, “As composing becomes more and more enmeshed in digital environments, tools, practices, and networks, we need to see this as a crossroads moment for our scholarship too” (274). Banks is correct to suggest that the increasingly networked, digital nature of composition demands that writing professionals examine their thought and behavior through new critical lenses. However, Banks may underestimate the structuring power of the ideological frameworks that have come to be inscribed and continue to inscribe themselves within composition studies discourse.

In Chapter II, twenty-six years of composition studies scholarship was reviewed that documents an ever-growing concern among writing professionals that their education-related technology practices risk jeopardizing student agency. Scholars’ primary method of response to networked digital technology’s threat to student agency has been to, in the spirit of Selfe, pay critical attention to how one’s technology practices may reinscribe ideology in often invisible ways. However, while the work of scholars such as Reyman and Beck suggests that the seemingly invisible surveillance of corporations and web sites may be, at least in part, combatted
through the practice of educating oneself and others regarding such surveillance (paying attention), the practice of government surveillance is not so easily combatted due to the opaque nature of the legal framework surrounding it. The phenomenon of ongoing government surveillance examined in Chapter I: Part One significantly complicates the mandate to pay attention to one’s technology use because, as a result of Section 702 of FISA, the mechanisms through which web users’ data is collected are largely secret. Indeed, one wonders if composition studies scholars’ current discussion of the implications of government surveillance would even be occurring had Snowden not illegally leaked PRISM documents to The Guardian and The Washington Post in 2013. The possibility that the government is surveilling web users in ways that said users are impotent to defend themselves against is one that should give composition studies scholars pause and should spur the composition studies community to, in the words of Banks, consider “the messy big picture concerns that structure technologies and our relationships to them” (275). It is exactly Banks’ task of “exploring the messy big picture” of technology and writing that forms the basis of this thesis (275). However, such exploration does not necessarily begin with the digital interface, but touches upon much deeper precepts of the field, precepts that serve to structure much of the discourse surrounding the intersection between technology and education, namely the a priori assumption of democratic humanist truth and the resulting emphasis upon the cultivation and defense of human agency as the purpose of writing education and practice.

In light of the findings of Chapter I: Part One, it is evident that the phenomenon of government surveillance significantly complicates traditional notions of human agency, because said agency is premised upon the ability of human beings to make deliberate choices. The secretive nature of government surveillance makes such deliberation significantly more difficult,
if not impossible, because the mechanisms through which said surveillance operates are not knowable. As indicated in Chapter I: Part One, there are currently attempts on the part of web companies such as Microsoft to be able to inform users if their web traffic is being surveilled. However, until the government provides such permissions, a wall of secrecy exists between web users and knowledge of whether the U. S. government is or is not using their data and to what end. As such, the state of human agency upon engaging with the digital interface is uncertain, and, given this uncertainty, it is necessary to analyze the role appeals to democratic humanism play in structuring composition studies’ discussion of the digital interface, specifically in regards to the correlation Selfe draws between paying attention and preserving human agency in the digital realm.

By evaluating Selfe’s call to pay attention to technology through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, namely his theory of habitus, it is demonstrated that democratic humanist ideology serves an a priori function within such discourse by privileging traditional notions of human agency. Ultimately, Chapter III suggests that composition studies’ democratic humanist emphasis upon human agency forms a bias through which it evaluates the threat of government surveillance, a bias that may prevent the field from considering the implications of government surveillance more broadly and the possibility that human agency is not sustainable as users engage with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.

**Part One: Bourdieu’s Theory of Habitus**

Originally published in 1972, Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* represents an attempt to articulate a theory of practice within communities that would help sociologists better understand and discuss how practice, itself, is generated. To this end, Bourdieu dispenses with what he terms “the *realism of the structure*,” a phrase that may be used to describe all theories
and interpretations of cultural practice that assume cultural practice follows ingrained, quantifiable patterns and, as such, is wholly predictable (Outline 72). Departing from theories that privilege a priori methodologies of cultural practice, theories that evaluate a given community’s practice through a universalizing lens, rather than according to the observed dynamics of the community, itself, Bourdieu points to habitus as a language through which to describe “the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality,” or, in other words, the complex process by which individuals and groups both ideologically inscribe others and are, themselves, inscribed (Outline 72). According to Bourdieu, habitus consists of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations” (Outline 72). As such, elements of habitus, though themselves produced through the interaction of other habitus, perpetuate themselves through cultural practice. In other words, an ideological structure, once internalized by a culture or member of a community, tends to reproduce itself within the community or individual. Like a virus, ideological structures are both self-replicating and constantly evolving in order to perpetuate themselves within a community, within the individuals that make up a community and within all individuals and groups that community comes into contact with.

The internalization and perpetuation of the habitus begins in youth and continues throughout one’s life. Indeed, according to Bourdieu it is from the shared reality of the habitus that common meaning is derived between members of a group. “The habitus is precisely this immanent law . . . laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination” (Outline 81). Internalized in youth, habitus is experienced neither as a product of individual consciousness or
as a product of one’s community. Instead, as an embodiment of structures operating within a
given community, the habitus, once internalized by a member of the community, charges the
performance of the habitus “with an objective meaning that is at once unitary and systematic,
transcending subjective intentions and conscious projects whether individual or collective”
(Outline 81). In other words, once the habitus is internalized by a member of a community, it
manifests itself, not as a personal choice in regards to thought or behavior or even as a cultural
prejudice that can be dispensed with, but as thought and behavior that the individual or group
perceives as natural, as self-evident truth. According to Bourdieu, much of what is perceived as
common sense is a function of habitus as it has been internalized throughout one’s life:

Practical evaluation of the likelihood of the success of a given action in a given situation
brings into play a whole body of wisdom, sayings commonplaces, ethical precepts . . .
and, at a deeper level, the unconscious principles of the ethos which, being the product of
a learning process dominated by a determinate type of objective regularities, determines
‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ conduct for every agent subjects to those regularities.
(Outline 77)

As a focused example illustrates, the habitus finds its expression in a community’s most sacred,
uncontested assumptions and beliefs, constituting and shaping a community and its members’
practical reality.

In Outline of a Theory of Practice, Bourdieu presents his observation and findings of the
Kabyle people of Algeria during the Algerian war, using this data as a the basis for his theory of
the habitus and the mechanisms of its operation in cultural practice generally (Nice vii). One
incarnation of the habitus that Bourdieu gives special attention to is the role honor plays in
structuring the thoughts and behavior of the Kabyle people. Bourdieu writes of the Kabyle that
the point of honour is a permanent disposition, embedded in the agents’ very bodies in the form of mental dispositions, schemes of perception and thought, extremely general in their application, such as those which divide up the world in accordance with the oppositions between male and the female, east and west, future and past, top and bottom, right and left, etc., and also, at a deeper level, in the form of bodily postures and stances, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, or walking. (Outline 15)

Significantly, Bourdieu asserts that the ideological system of honor is inscribed within the thoughts and behaviors of the Kabyle people to the extent that it serves to structure those thoughts and behaviors, even to the point of affecting seemingly simple, unconscious bodily acts. Indeed, given the pervasive nature of the habitus, one may act unconsciously while reinscribing the ideological system that structures and is, in turn, structured by that action. However, Bourdieu is quick to point out that the structuring operation of the habitus is not wholly deterministic, as, even within the most formal of ritual settings, Kabyle “agents remain in command of the interval between the obligatory moments and can therefore act on their opponents by playing with the tempo of the exchange” (Outline 15). As such, the members of a community retain partial autonomy in that they can choose how to style their performance of the habitus, even if the performance, itself, is determined.

However, despite such intimations of self-determination, Bourdieu’s description of the habitus’ operation leaves questionable room for human agency, a question that is further emphasized by the following statement: “The habitus is the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic invention – which would presuppose at least that they are perceived as one strategy among other possible strategies” (Outline 73). According to Bourdieu, the habitus, once internalized by an
individual or community, proceeds to structure thought and behavior within that individual or community. In spite of this structuring operation, the individual retains a certain amount of control, according to Bourdieu, over how the habitus is expressed, but the habitus’ expression is inevitable. Furthermore, in light of the preceding passage, even an individual’s consideration of how to navigate a given habitus may be more a sensation of strategy than an objective assessment of a plurality of actually existing options. Given the structuring and structured nature of the habitus, human agency is a problematized category within Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. This is not to suggest, however, that once a given habitus has been internalized by an individual or culture that it continues to structure that individual or culture’s thoughts and behaviors without alteration or end.

Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus allows for a given habitus’ operation within a community to be ruptured by another habitus, a phenomenon that often manifests through generational conflict within the same community. The source of such rupture lies in the relationship between habitus’ structuring operation in regards to thought and behavior and the material, perceived phenomena one is thinking about and interacting with (Bourdieu, *Outline* 78). According to Bourdieu, conflict can arise when the habitus as internalized ideological structure no longer represents or is perceived to adequately respond to current material and cultural circumstances:

practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted. This is why generation conflicts oppose not age-classes separated by natural properties, but habitus which have been produced by different *modes of generation*, that is, by conditions of existence which, in imposing different definitions of the impossible, the
possible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa. (Outline 78)

As such, a group existing within a given community may interpret and respond to phenomena through the structuring of one habitus, while another group existing within the same community may respond to the same phenomena through the structuring of a different habitus. It is in this struggle between habitus that social change occurs, change that, like the violent fragmentation of a glacier, may be experienced as abrupt and disruptive, but is in actuality the externalization of changes that have been occurring largely without notice for perhaps unmeasurable lengths of time.

Chapter IV explores exactly such a cultural shift in the form of alien phenomenology and its promise to help composition studies scholars pay attention to their technology use in ways that do not reinscribe democratic humanist notions of agency, a view of agency that has questionable relevance when considering the issue of government surveillance. However, prior to positing the internalization of a new habitus to structure the thoughts and behaviors of composition studies scholars, one that is less ideologically-charged than the mandate to pay attention promulgated within the field thus far, it will be beneficial to evaluate composition studies’ research into the implications of the digital interface through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, especially that research which presents paying attention as a means of resisting the digital interface’s threat to human agency. By adopting Bourdieu’s theory of habitus as a lens through which to analyze Selfe’s call to writing professionals to pay attention to their technology use, it is demonstrated that Selfe’s call to action naturalizes democratic humanist notions of agency. Selfe’s construction of a causal relationship between paying attention and increased
agency perpetuates the assumption that human beings may retain power even as they engage with networked digital interfaces. Furthermore, by examining Beck’s application of Selfe’s argument as a response to government surveillance, it is shown that Selfe’s correlation between paying attention and increased agency structures digital writing scholars’ response to government surveillance in ways that risk limiting scholars’ consideration of the implications of government surveillance for networked writing instruction.

Part Two: Paying Attention to the Habitus of Democratic Humanism within Composition Studies

If the great body of composition studies scholarship could, like the terrain of a satellite map, be viewed both as a whole and in its individual parts, the viewer would see that the channels and arteries that feed writing scholars’ discussion of the implications of the digital interface are, themselves, fed by the spring of democratic humanism. As a habitus operating within the culture of composition studies, democratic humanist ideology and its accompanying a priori assumptions regarding human agency serve to nourish the landscape of digital writing scholarship. Furthermore, if democratic humanism forms the nourishing waters of composition studies, then Selfe’s argument to writing professionals to pay attention constitutes the mechanism through which those waters flow. Indeed, Selfe’s call to pay attention is both the means and the result of the democratic humanist emphasis within composition studies. Throughout her scholarship of the digital, Selfe advocates paying attention as a means of resisting the uncritical reinscription of harmful cultural values onto technology users, a form of resistance that, according to Selfe, serves to preserve human agency. Approximately eight years prior to Technology and Literacy, one can see clear indications in Selfe’s scholarship that the digital interface is a vessel for ideology and, as such, must be rigorously interrogated by those
who advocate and use it. However, as closer analysis will indicate, even in Selfe’s early research, her positioning of paying attention as a path of resistance serves to naturalize democratic humanist notions of agency.

Much of Hawisher and Selfe’s critique of digital writing instruction in “The Rhetoric of Technology” centers on instructors’ tendency to engage with the digital interface in uncritical ways that reinforce authoritarian values, thereby jeopardizing student agency. Despite the benefits of technology in the classroom, its unconscious use “simply magnified the power differential between students and the instructor. Ostensibly computers were being used to ‘share’ writing, but the effect of such sharing was to make the class more teacher-centered and teacher-controlled” (Hawisher and Selfe 61). One incarnation of this increased instructor control was “the use of style analyzers to underscore student errors more effectively than they did five years ago with red pens” (61). Significantly, Hawisher and Selfe position increased instructor control through the use of technology as a negative effect of that technology, thereby suggesting that technology that serves to increase oversight of students is problematic in writing instruction. Such increased control is problematic for Hawisher and Selfe precisely because “electronic spaces, like other spaces, are constructed within contextual and political frameworks of cultural values,” values that reinscribe themselves in the technologies produced and used in those frameworks (63). Indeed, “[a]s in corporate settings, the architecture of computer networking may encourage ‘surveillance’ of participants,” a tendency toward surveillance that manifests in instructors’ use of technology as a means of seizing greater control over their students (63).

While not invoking the phrases democracy or humanism directly, Hawisher and Selfe foreshadow such invocation in Technology and Literacy. Specifically, by asserting that instructors have an obligation to foster digital learning environments that “provide room for
positive activities” for students without reinscribing cultural values in uncritical ways that mitigate student agency through instructor surveillance, Hawisher and Selfe construct a narrative in which instructors may pay attention to technology and then act in ways that preserve students’ agency within the networked digital classroom (63). According to Selfe and Hawisher, “writing instructors, by thinking critically and carefully about technology, can succeed in using it to improve the educational spaces we inhabit,” with such improvement being identified with increased student agency in the form of freedom of expression (64).

As an early example of Selfe’s linking of paying attention with the preservation of student agency, “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” enacts the discursive strategies of habitus that would be enacted more overtly in Technology and Literacy. Specifically, by positioning the act of “thinking critically and carefully about technology” (Hawisher and Selfe 64) as a basis for instructors constructing classroom spaces in which they do not surveil students through such practice as “‘inspecting’ [student] conversations that occur electronically” (63), Hawisher and Selfe enact Bourdieu’s vision of habitus as a cultural operation in which “the scheme is identified with the model . . . , the product a project” (Outline 9). For Hawisher and Selfe, the cultivation and defense of student agency is positioned as an a priori goal (“product”) of composition studies scholarship, and instructors’ act of paying attention to their technology practices is presented as a sustained and sustaining strategy (“scheme”) through which this purpose may be accomplished (Bourdieu, Outline 9). By positioning the preservation of student agency as the result of writing professionals’ decision to pay attention to their technology use, Selfe forwards an early instance of the implicit argument that human agency is a preservable category in the face of the networked digital interface. That Selfe does not directly mention democratic humanism or its vision of agency directly reflects the
tendency of the habitus to structure cultural discourse in often invisible ways. For instance, Bourdieu writes, “The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (*Distinction* 466). As such, Selfe’s a priori assumption that human agency is a preservable category even as students and writing professionals engage with increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces, may be interpreted as a manifestation of a democratic humanist habitus that privileges agency in often reflexive ways.

Selfe’s linking of paying attention with increased agency may be problematic for composition studies discourse of the digital because it naturalizes a narrative in which human agency is taken for granted. Indeed, Selfe’s narrative of paying attention does not allow for the possibility that the act of “thinking critically and carefully about technology” may, far from preserving human agency, actually reveal that student agency is not sustainable through engagement with the networked digital interface (Hawisher and Selfe 64). In other words, because Selfe constructs paying attention to one’s technology use as an inherent component of protecting student agency, she effectively precludes the possibility that human agency is not a sustainable intellectual category in the face of the digital interface. Indeed, Hawisher and Selfe characterize the situation facing educators as one in which they must learn how to navigate digital technology in ways that take advantage of its benefits, while protecting students against the potential for the creators of the digital space to use technology as a mechanism of oppression. What is not considered is the possibility that the digital interface cannot be controlled in the ways called for, that the complex, networked nature of the digital interface is such that no instructor or student can ever hope to understand it enough to exert the control needed to maintain their
agency while interacting with it, a dilemma that is exacerbated by the secret, inaccessible nature of digital phenomena such as government surveillance. Hawisher and Selfe’s decision to link paying attention with student agency perpetuates the assumption within composition studies’ intellectual milieu that students possess the opportunity to maintain their agency even as they engage with the digital interface and that instructors possess the ability to facilitate student control over the networked digital interfaces with which students are asked to interact. As such, Selfe’s linking of paying attention with preserving human agency may overlook ways in which agency is not a sustainable intellectual category in light of users’ engagement with the networked digital interface.

Though Hawisher and Selfe’s emphasis upon paying attention as a means of cultivating and protecting student agency serves to reinforce a democratic humanist vision of self-determination in the face of digital technology, the act of paying attention came to be more overtly linked with the habitus of democratic humanism and the values it inscribes as composition studies scholarship continued through the 1990s. For instance, in the 1994 “The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones,” Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe argue that a primary mission of writing professionals is to interrogate how digital technology reinscribes cultural values in ways that may jeopardize student agency, and, in large part, Selfe and Selfe define student agency in terms of democratic practice, practice that is mitigated by the agency-erasing threats of the digital frontier. For example, Selfe and Selfe write that, “while we, as individual English teachers, may very strongly support democratic reform, broad involvement, or egalitarian education, and while our teaching and computer use may be aimed toward these ends—we are also simultaneously participating in a cultural project that, at some level and to some degree, seems to support racist, sexist, and colonial attitudes” (484). In
this passage, Selfe and Selfe implicate writing professionals as agents who, by using and assigning technology, are culpable in the reinscription of harmful cultural values. Significantly, in opposition to such “racist, sexist, and colonial attitudes,” Selfe and Selfe present “democratic reform” (484). In a move that foreshadows Selfe’s democratic humanist emphasis in *Technology and Literacy*, Selfe and Selfe reinforce a binary in which the cultivation of democratic values serves to resist values identified as harmful, i.e. undemocratic.

By investing democratic values with a priori value, Selfe and Selfe perpetuate a habitus in which democracy is assumed to be the both the goal of writing instruction and the means by which that goal is achieved. In other words, “the scheme is identified with the model . . . , the product a project” (Bourdieu, *Outline* 9). Because such appeals to democratic values are not interrogated within “The Politics of the Interface,” they serve to construct and naturalize a narrative in composition studies in which it is taken for granted that the pursuit of democratic values will function to preserve human agency in the face of agency-jeopardizing aspects of the digital interface. Selfe and Selfe’s privileging of democratic values illustrates the ways in which the habitus of democratic humanism serves to structure discourse within the community of composition studies. According to Bourdieu, “the primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident” (*Distinction*, 471). As a form of habitus, democratic humanism structures Selfe and Selfe’s response to agency-threatening aspects of the digital interface by propelling them to reflexively position the pursuit of democracy as an unquestioned purpose of composition studies, despite the ways in which the interface hinders the achievement of that purpose. The practical result of this privileging of democratic values is that it prevents composition studies scholarship of the digital from
considering the possibility that democratic values and, specifically, democracy’s construction of human agency may not be sustainable as students engage with the networked digital interface.

Despite Sefte and Selfe’s privileging of democratic values in the face of the digital interface, they are adamant that such interfaces jeopardize the achievement of democratic ends. For instance, Sefte and Selfe suggest that it would be a mistake for writing professionals to assume that digital interfaces are inherently democratic simply because they allow users to participate in digital environments “within which cues of gender, race, and socioeconomic status are minimized” (483-484). As discussed in Chapter II, Sefte and Selfe assert that the digital interface is “non-innocent” and, as such, serves to reinscribe the cultural values embodied within the contexts in which it is created and used (495). However, despite Sefte and Selfe’s assertion that digital interfaces tend to reinscribe harmful (i.e. undemocratic) values onto their users, they do not argue that the field of writing studies should suspend use of networked, digital interfaces completely. Instead, Sefte and Selfe argue that writing professionals must resist such agency-jeopardizing aspects of the digital interface, and the means by which such resistance will occur, according to Sefte and Selfe, is by writing professionals paying critical attention to digital technology and its uses within the writing classroom.

As with Hawisher and Sefte’s 1991 “The Rhetoric of Technology,” Sefte and Selfe’s 1994 “The Politics of the Interface” does not employ the exact language of paying attention that would be popularized in Technology and Literacy approximately five years later. However, the call to pay attention is clearly presented as a response to the agency-jeopardizing aspects of digital technology Sefte and Selfe describe. Employing the language of cartography, Sefte and Selfe assert that the digital interface contains “cultural information . . . [that] can serve to reproduce, on numerous discursive levels and through a complex set of conservative forces, the
asymmetrical power relations that, in part, have shaped the educational system we labor within and that students are exposed to” (485). In other words, just as a map embodies the cultural values and agendas of the entities who crafted it, the digital interface reinscribes the values and agendas of the entities who forged it. However, Selfe and Selfe suggest that this process of reinscription is not inevitable and may, through the practice of paying attention, be resisted. According to Selfe and Selfe, it is vital that writing professionals attempt to “identify the cultural information passed along in the maps of computer interfaces,” and through this practice of paying attention, instructors may engage with the digital interface more responsibly (485). In addition to paying attention to the cultural values that are reproduced through the formation of the digital interface, Selfe and Selfe, drawing from research conducted by Laclau and Mouffe, emphasize the importance of considering those cultural values that are omitted: “It is only when we recognize these gestures of omission for what they are, as interested versions of reality, that we can begin to examine the naturalizing functions of computer interfaces and, as educators, break the frame to extend the discursive horizon (Laclau and Mouffe 19) of the landscape we have created and that, in turn, creates us and the students in our classes” (486). Whereas in the previous passage, Selfe and Selfe invoked the language of identification to encourage readers to pay attention to the digital interface (485), this passage asks readers to “recognize . . . gestures” that make up the interface (486). However, both passages emphasize the need for writing professionals to pay attention to the implications of their technology use as a means of resisting the ways in which digital technology may inscribe cultural values onto the user.

Like “The Rhetoric of Technology,” “The Politics of the Interface” enacts a particular habitus within the culture of composition studies in which paying attention to one’s technology use serves to preserve one’s agency in the face of potentially agency-erasing aspects of the
networked digital interface. According to Selfe and Selfe, “Once we recognize these functions, we also begin to understand” the ways in which the networked digital interface serves to reinscribe cultural values (486). Indeed, according to Selfe and Selfe, the absence of critical examination of the digital interface is deeply problematic, as “the alignment of these cultural maps along the articulated axes of capitalism, class, gender, and race creates a set of tendential forces that continues to value approaches associated primarily with dominant ideological positions” (494). In other words, if instructors do not pay attention to the ways in which digital technology reinscribes cultural values, they risk reproducing such values in the classroom. In opposition to this reinscription of cultural values, Selfe and Selfe suggest that instructors may, if the material technological resources of their institution allows, “provide students room to take some charge of their own learning” and engage in other practices that help to “avoid a teacher-centered classroom” (497). This emphasis upon non-authoritarian, student-directed learning echoes the sentiment of “The Rhetoric of Technology” and asserts a link between the cultivation of student agency and the resistance of the networked digital interface’s tendency to reinscribe cultural values through the act of paying attention to such reinscription.

As with Hawisher and Selfe’s “The Rhetoric of Technology,” Selfe and Selfe’s linking of the act of paying attention to technology use with the cultivation and preservation of human agency in regards to how one engages with the digital interface perpetuates a particular habitus in which human agency is assumed to be a sustainable category even as human beings interact with increasingly networked digital interfaces that challenge traditional notions of human agency. However, that Selfe and Selfe naturalize the language of agency in relation to the digital interface is somewhat surprising in light of how they problematize similar naturalizing strategies in the discourse of the digital interface, itself. For instance, Selfe and Selfe critique how much of
the digital interface functions to perpetuate “the values of rationality, hierarchy, and logocentrism characteristic of Western patriarchal cultures” (491). Selfe and Selfe argue that “[t]his way of representing knowledge within computer environments, although not essentially limiting or exclusive by itself, becomes so when linked to a positivist value on rationality and logic as foundational ways of knowing that function to exclude other ways of knowing, such as association, intuition, or bricolage” (491). Thus, though Selfe and Selfe target the tendency of the digital interface to reinscribe normative Western, patriarchal values, their primary critique lies in the tendency of the digital interface to embody and inscribe particular cultural values while marginalizing others, a process of marginalization that, by implication, limits the phenomenal world constructed by the interface itself. However, despite their critique of the structuring power of the discourse of the digital interface, Selfe and Selfe’s research, like the digital interfaces they critique, serves to reinscribe a habitus within the composition studies community in which human agency is constructed as a preservable category in the face of the networked digital interface, a construction that risks privileging positivist narratives of human agency over narratives that approach human agency as a problematized category and not preservable within the digital realm.

By constructing a link between paying attention and the preservation of human agency, Selfe and Selfe not only perpetuate the habitus of democratic humanism within the culture of composition studies, but they rhetorically link democratic humanist understandings of agency with the act of paying attention. Bourdieu discusses such operations of the habitus within a community’s discourse as a form of “[o]fficial language” operating within that community (Outline 21). According to Bourdieu, the official language of a given community occupies a relationship to habitus in which that language both embodies and reinscribes the habitus. As
such, “[o]fficial language . . . sanctions and imposes what it states, tacitly laying down the dividing line between the thinkable and the unthinkable, thereby contributing towards the maintenance of the symbolic order from which it draws its authority” (Outline 21). Considered in light of Bourdieu’s thoughts on the relationship between official language the operations of habitus, it may be argued that Selfe and Selfe’s automatic linking of paying attention and agency, a linkage in which cultivating the former increases the latter, is both a manifestation of democratic humanism and its notions of human agency and serves to reinforce democratic humanist notions of agency within composition studies discourse. It may be argued that this a priori emphasis upon human agency serves a limiting, if not disciplinary role within the culture of composition studies scholarship. For Selfe and Selfe, as with later composition studies scholars, the question is not whether human agency is compatible with the networked digital interface; instead, the question centers on how writing professionals can construct the interfaces they ask students to engage with in ways that preserves student agency, a perspective that privileges the assumption that human agency is a sustainable category and thereby risks curbing theoretical perspectives and scholarship that do not privilege human agency in the same way. Ironically, by positioning paying attention as a means of preserving human agency against Western society’s assault on non-Western, non-rational ways of knowing, Selfe and Selfe attack one habitus only to replace it with another, one that privileges human agency as an a priori category.

Selfe and Selfe’s correlation of paying attention with agency does not apply only to students, but encompasses the instructors, themselves. Just as Selfe and Selfe argue that instructors should cultivate technological environments that “provide students room to take charge of their own learning,” they also emphasize the importance of instructors taking charge of
how the digital learning environment, itself, is constructed, an emphasis that serves to perpetuate a narrative in which instructors, in addition to students, may retain agency and some degree of self-determination even while interacting with the digital interface (497). By presenting “tactics that teachers can use to enact a radical pedagogy of electronic borders and borderlands,” Selfe and Selfe perpetuate a narrative in which instructors are assumed to retain self-determination and agency even as they interact with complex, networked digital interfaces (482). Read within this context, the implied argument of paying attention is that, if only instructors and, by extension, students can learn to pay attention well enough, then they will somehow learn how to foster digital environments that sustain human agency. As an incarnation of Bourdieu’s concept of “official language,” Selfe and Selfe’s linking of paying attention with the preservation of human agency precludes the possibility that human agency cannot be sustained through interaction with the networked digital interface (Outline 21). As such, Selfe and Selfe’s a priori acceptance of human agency as a preservable category risks limiting scholarly discussion of the implications of the digital interface, a limitation that is troubling in light of government surveillance. Said another way, in light of the secret nature of government surveillance examined in Chapter I: Part One, it is likely impossible for web users to know whether their information is being collected. As such, it may be that no amount of paying attention will help writing instructors construct digital learning environments in which their students’ agency is completely protected even as they engage with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance. Selfe and Selfe’s correlation of paying attention to the digital interface with the maintenance of human agency is problematic for writing professionals because it risks limiting scholarly discussion within composition studies that examines the implications of government surveillance for student
agency by discouraging scholars from considering the possibility that such agency is not a preservable category in light of the government’s secretive surveillance practices.

In many respects, Selfe’s work with Hawisher in the 1991 “The Rhetoric of Technology” and her work with Richard Selfe in the 1994 “The Politics of the Interface” foreshadow what would come in Selfe’s 1999 Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention. Whereas the preceding articles illustrate Selfe’s concern that the unreflective acceptance of digital learning technologies risks reinscribing unwanted cultural values onto students and intimate that paying attention to one’s technology use may help one resist such values, Technology and Literacy overtly declares that the act of paying attention to digital technology can help to mitigate technology’s reinscription of cultural values and, in doing so, preserve student agency even as students interact with increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces. Indeed, Technology and Literacy, taken as a whole, reads much like a manifesto or statement of revolution in which Selfe champions writing professionals’ ability to reclaim technology as educational tool from the government and corporate interests who have sought to exploit digital learning technologies for their own selfish political and profit-driven ends. Adopting an activist tone throughout, Selfe asserts a clear link between paying attention and the preservation of humanist notions of agency within the context of digital writing: “By paying attention to the unfamiliar subject of technology—in sustained and critical ways, and from our own perspectives as humanists—we may learn some important lessons about how to go about making change in literacy instruction” (134). Statements such as this illustrate the deep connections Selfe emphasizes between paying attention to technology, cultivating a critical understanding of it and having greater control over how digital technology is used. Selfe’s
connection between paying attention and increased agency in regards to digital technology use is one that is echoed throughout Technology and Literacy.

One of the foundational assumptions underlying Technology and Literacy is that the torrent of digital technology flooding the United States and the world is ever growing, and it is this inevitable growth of technology that demands writing professionals pay attention to how digital technology is produced and used. For instance, Selfe begins Technology and Literacy by asserting that “technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country,” a statement that underlies Selfe’s recurring emphasis on technology as an unavoidable aspect of writing instruction (xxiii). According to Selfe, it is precisely the inevitability of technology that makes it so dangerous and, by extension, makes it so irresponsible for instructors to ignore it. Indeed, for Selfe the consequences of ignoring the relationship between technology and literacy is “the clear and shameful recognition that we have failed students, failed as humanists, and failed to establish an ethical foundation for future educational efforts in this country” (5). By linking the failure to pay attention to technology with the prospect of writing professionals failing as humanists, Selfe rhetorically positions humanist belief, belief embodied in praxis, as a measure of instructor success.

Such a rhetorical strategy is troubling because it constructs a binary in which one either performs humanist values or one performs anti-humanist values, thereby reinforcing a hierarchy in which the performance of humanist values is a necessary component not just of effective, ethical instructors, but of education, itself. As suggested in the preceding analysis of Selfe and Selfe’s “The Politics of the Interface,” Selfe’s privileging of humanist values stands to limit composition studies scholarship by fostering a narrative in which digital technology can only be acceptably examined through a humanist lens. As such, Selfe’s a priori construction of humanist
ideology may be interpreted as an example of what Bourdieu terms “officializing strategies” (Outline 40). According to Bourdieu, such strategies seek “to transmute ‘egoistic’, private, particular interests . . . into disinterested, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests” (Outline 40). In other words, by rhetorically linking paying attention to technology with the preservation of culturally dominant notions of humanism, Selfe generates rhetorical power for her assertion. Furthermore, by linking paying attention with the realization of humanist values, Selfe reduces the possibility that other scholars within the composition studies community will question the efficacy of paying attention as a response to the digital interface because such questioning may be tantamount to questioning humanism, itself. This privileging of humanist values continues throughout Technology and Literacy, a privileging that is intertwined with Selfe’s mandate to composition studies scholars to pay attention to their technology use.

Throughout Technology and Literacy, Selfe traces the rise of technoliteracy initiatives throughout the 1990s, initiatives that encompass and are perpetuated by the spheres of government (43-63), education (64-85), the private sector (86-97), the parents of students, themselves (98-113) and, finally, ideology (114-130). However, even though Selfe clearly positions the rise of digital technology as a social phenomenon, as the result of a complex series of choices made by human beings at many different levels of society, she positions the continued existence of digital technology as inevitable, as not subject to human choice, at least not in any sense that enables an individual to negate technology’s rise. Indeed, Selfe is critical of individuals who attempt to opt out of the ever-increasing flow of digital technology in society:

Such individuals may choose not to purchase or use a computer (and may feel righteously insistent in this choice), but they are still intimately involved in a web of technological choices, many of which they fail to recognize. Often, for example, citizens who have
chosen a visible path of resisting computer technology (not using computers themselves, not purchasing a home computer) feel they are absolved, or removed, from the responsibility of paying attention to technology generally. And worse, they may come to believe decisions about technology should be made by others. Operating from this conceptual ground, people may ignore many other decisions about technology that touch their lives in less immediate and visible ways. (37)

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights Selfe’s construction of technology as an inevitable force citizens and, by extension, writing professionals must contend with. Second, Selfe suggests that, because digital technology is so insidious, having pervaded virtually every aspect of one’s life, any attempt at opting out of technology use will very likely simply reinscribe technology, albeit in less conscious ways. Finally, Selfe indicates that, by paying attention to one’s technology use or technology use more generally in society, one may develop greater control or agency in regards to how such technology is used and one’s role in that use. It is this final assertion that forms the central mandate of Technology and Literacy and, as such, demands increased scrutiny in order to determine what the act of paying attention looks like within Selfe’s argument.

As the preceding examinations of “The Rhetoric of Technology” and “The Politics of the Interface” suggest, Selfe’s call to pay attention in Technology and Literacy echoes an argument that Selfe had been making for several years. Indeed, this is pointed out by Hugh Burns in his forward to Technology and Literacy when he testifies to Selfe’s enduring influence on the field of composition studies and its considerations of the implications of digital technology, specifically. Burns writes that, when he attended the CCCC’s conference in 1998 and “heard Cynthia present a keynote adaptation of this book” (ix), he “was not surprised” that Selfe
emphasized the need for writing professionals to pay attention to technology because “[s]he had been reminding [him] to pay attention for over twenty years” (x). Despite the challenges and confusions posed by the increasingly complex, pervasive nature of digital technology, Selfe’s research has continued to convey the hope that instructors may exercise control over such technology by paying critical attention to it. However, Selfe’s mandate is not limited to paying attention for attention’s sake; it is deeply intertwined with the subsequent assertion that, by paying closer attention to technology, instructors must then use their new understandings to exercise control over such technology in order to foster the values of democratic humanism.

Early in *Technology and Literacy*, Selfe emphasizes the importance of paying attention as a precursor to effective action. For example, in her outline of part three of her book, Selfe states that “[t]his section details lessons that educators can relearn about literacy, specifically by paying attention to technology and the ways in which technology is currently being approached in our culture at large . . . This final section also suggests sites within which teachers of literacy can shape the relationship between technology and literacy in increasingly active and productive ways” (xxii). Here, Selfe creates a clear link between the act of paying attention to technology and the exercise of control over that technology, control that is, in turn, mediated by the promotion of specific technoliteracy goals. This relationship between paying attention and increased control over technology is further illustrated when Selfe asserts that
teachers of composition . . . have two . . . obligations: first, paying attention to how technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country; and, second, helping colleagues, students, administrators, politicians, and other Americans use their increasingly critical and productive perspective on technological literacy to make productive social change. (xxii-xxiii)
According to Selfe, paying attention is only the first of a two-step process in which the goal is to exercise increased control over technology in order to facilitate the achievement of certain educational and ideological ends. Indeed, it is significant that, in both of the passages examined in this paragraph, Selfe refers to the result of paying attention as one that is “productive” in nature (xxii, xxiii). Further analysis of *Technology and Literacy* demonstrates that Selfe’s two-fold mandate of paying attention and creating “productive social change” serves to produce ideology by reinscribing democratic humanist notions of human agency (xxiii). As a form of Bourdieu’s habitus, Selfe’s emphasis upon democratic humanism serves to structure much of her argument regarding the relationship between paying attention and the preservation of human agency. Indeed, Selfe appeals to democratic humanism as an a priori value, as an unquestioned end-in-itself, the achievement of which is the focus of Selfe’s argument to writing professionals to pay attention.

Throughout *Technology and Literacy*, Selfe emphasizes the pursuit of democracy and humanism as a basis for effective decision making within the field of writing studies. As stated by Burns, Selfe “understands how democracy should work in education and how education must work for democracy” (ix). While Burns makes this assertion in the foreword of *Technology and Literacy*, his claim is evidenced by the content of the book, itself. As indicated previously, early on in *Technology and Literacy* Selfe links the absence of paying attention with writing professionals’ failure as “humanists” (5); however, Selfe goes on to discuss the failure of “the national project to expand technological literacy,” a project that “has not resulted in a better life or more democratic opportunities” (7). It is in current technoliteracy initiatives’ failure to foster “democratic cooperation” that Selfe finds such great fault, a failure that, according to Selfe, “implicates teachers as well, despite our best intentions” (7). For Selfe, the stakes are so high in
regards to paying attention to technology because a lack of attention serves to perpetuate social practices and perspectives that violate democratic humanist values. In response to this danger arises Selfe’s ethical mandate to writing professionals: “We cannot responsibly afford to maintain our current disinterested profile much longer without engaging in a willful ignorance that yields serious consequences” (10). For Selfe, the consequences of failing to pay attention to technology is to fail to uphold democratic humanist values. Indeed, for Selfe, paying attention is, itself, a form of democratic humanist practice because it reflects the creative act of individuals critically evaluating their technological environment in order to exercise greater control over that environment. Selfe writes, “By paying attention to the unfamiliar subject of technology—in sustained and critical ways, and from our own perspectives as humanists—we may learn some important lessons about how to go about making change in literacy instruction” (134). In this passage, Selfe asserts a relationship between paying attention through a humanist lens and fostering what is constructed as positive change within education and society. Furthermore, by positioning the act of paying attention as both the result and means of perpetuating democratic humanist values, Selfe not only attempts to structure writing studies’ discussion of the digital interface through the habitus of democratic humanism, but she links that discussion’s construction of students’ agency with the habitus of democratic humanism, as well.

A key feature of Selfe’s earlier scholarship is that she often appeals to certain cherished ideologies without labelling those ideologies, e.g. democracy or humanism. As such, while Selfe’s appeals to the ideologies of democracy and humanism and her linking of such ideologies with the act of paying attention serve to construct a narrative in which paying attention to technology is a means by which writing professionals may preserve the agency of their students, rarely does Selfe overtly identify a causal relationship between paying attention and cultivating
human agency. However, there are key points within *Technology and Literacy* in which such overt statements are provided, and examining them will help to illuminate the relationship between Selfe’s mandate to pay attention and democratic humanist constructions of human agency more clearly.

Early in *Technology and Literacy*, Selfe positions society’s transforming relationship with technology as fundamental to how citizens view human agency. Selfe writes, “These struggles—and the public debates that characterize them—are significant because they help shape America’s ongoing relationship with technology, the ways in which citizens think of human agency within this relationship . . . (4). Selfe then expands upon her assertion, stating that “[t]he price we pay for ignoring this situation is the clear and shameful recognition that we have failed students, failed as humanists, and failed to establish an ethical foundation for future educational efforts in this country” (5). Considered in light of the latter passage, the former’s use of agency may be read as critical of ways in which technology may jeopardize human agency as Selfe understands it, an understanding that is firmly rooted in the humanist tradition.

Furthermore, when examined in relation to Selfe’s invocation of agency in a later portion of *Technology and Literacy*, it becomes clear that Selfe is arguing for a direct causal relationship between the act of paying attention and the preservation of human agency.

After surveying strategies through which instructors may “build . . . a critical component” into their curriculum in order to help students develop more critical awareness of the implications of their technology use, Selfe draws a clear parallel between the potential for such instructional strategies to help students pay attention to technology and an increase in instructor and student agency in relation to their technology use (154). Selfe writes that
students and faculty who participate in such problem-solving projects can develop productive strategies of agency in connection with technology. In this regard, they acquire the habit of making critically informed decisions about technology rather than becoming passive consumers of technological goods. Our culture will need these activists in school board and PTO meetings, in small businesses, on corporate boards, and in government agencies where decisions about communication technologies will influence the personal and professional lives of citizens. (155-156)

According to Selfe, paying attention to technology is a necessary precursor to the cultivation of greater agency not just for writing professionals and students, but for all members of society. This agency manifests in a form of activism in which individuals exercise greater control over the relationship with technology and the ways in which technology operates in society. Ultimately, Selfe links the cultivation of human agency that occurs through the act of paying attention with the necessary perpetuation of democratic humanist ideology, writing professionals’ “belief that literacy instruction makes life more fulfilling, more clearly informed by democratic and humanistic values for the human beings we teach” (161). Indeed, according to Selfe, “It is our obligation, as educators, to commit ourselves to reading and analyzing these texts and the lives of students . . . ” (160), and “[i]t is [Selfe’s] hope that by paying some attention to technology, we may become better humanists we well” (161). The assumption that paying attention to one’s technology use will increase one’s agency and control in regards to said technology is one that underlies much of Technology and Literacy. However, Selfe’s emphasis upon agency is an externalized occurrence of the more deeply imbedded habitus of democratic humanism that serves to structure Selfe’s argument.
The significance of Selfe’s correlation of paying attention with increased human agency within a democratic humanist model cannot be overestimated in its importance as an operation of the habitus of democratic humanism that structures discourse within composition studies. According to Bourdieu, “The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality – in particular, social reality – is a major dimension of political power” (*Outline* 165). Therefore, by constructing a causal relationship between paying attention and human agency, a relationship in which the practice of the former increases the latter, Selfe constructs a narrative within composition studies in which human agency is positioned as a sustainable category in the face of the networked digital interface, a narrative that, in turn, serves to structure discourse within the field. However, in light of the increasingly networked nature of the digital interface, it is unclear whether any amount of paying attention will allow users to retain their agency as it is constructed within the democratic humanist framework Selfe advocates. Furthermore, as indicated in Chapter I: Part One, the covert nature of government surveillance is such that no amount of paying attention will allow one to understand the mechanisms through which it operates, nor what actions one might take to avoid such surveillance, other than abstaining from the networked digital interfaces implicated in its operation. With Selfe’s call to pay attention in order to preserve human agency on one hand and the potential unfeasibility of paying attention on the other, composition scholars who attempt to enact Selfe’s mandate may find themselves in an intellectual and ethical bind in regards to how they respond to the threat of government surveillance. Within Selfe’s framework, being an ethical writing instructor requires that one pay attention to technology in order to cultivate a democratic humanist vision of student agency; however, the act of paying attention to networked digital technology suggests, in the case of
government surveillance, that democratic humanist constructions of human agency may not be sustainable as users interact within increasingly complex, networked digital interfaces that expose them to the threat of government surveillance.

**Part Three: The Difficulty of Paying Attention to Government Surveillance**

As indicated in Chapter II, Selfe’s argument to pay attention has significantly influenced composition studies discourse that considers the implications of government surveillance. Indeed, even in her 2013 interview with Beck, Selfe echoes her call to pay attention by asserting that “[w]e must re-attend every time to technology and how we use it in our endeavors” (353). Selfe’s 2013 argument seems far more tentative than that found in 1999’s *Technology and Literacy*, especially when read in light of Selfe’s preceding statements within the same interview that “technology is disappearing in terms of being naturalized” and that “technology disappears into the background” (353). The increasingly invisible nature of networked digital technology is an issue that concerns, not just Selfe, but digital writing scholars such as Beck. Still, by emphasizing Selfe’s call to pay attention to technology use as a means by which instructors may resist government surveillance, Beck’s research illustrates the tendency of composition studies scholars of the digital to link paying attention with the preservation of human agency, a correlation that may no longer be tenable in light of the insidious, secret nature of government surveillance.

A significant aspect of Beck’s research on government surveillance is that she employs Selfe’s mandate to pay attention as part of a larger argument that writing professionals must pay attention to the implications of government surveillance for writing instruction in order to productively respond to the threat of such surveillance. For example, in “Writing Educator Responsibilities for Discussing the History and Practice of Surveillance [sic] & Privacy in
Writing Classrooms,” Beck draws a comparison between Selfe’s statement in her 2013 interview with Beck that “[w]e must re-attend every time to technology, and how we use it in our endeavors” (Beck 353) and Selfe’s “powerful call to the field to pay attention to technology and literacy” in Technology and Literacy. After demonstrating Selfe’s continuing emphasis upon paying attention as a response to technology, Beck then “asks[s] how educators are continuing to pay attention to technology in ways that explore digital surveillance and privacy in connection with writing infrastructures.” In what follows, Beck outlines a series of strategies through which writing professionals may resist surveillance practices by paying attention to technology in ways that educate themselves and the community. Beck’s strategies include the following: “exploring websites during a class period” in order to help students understand the dangers of providing personal information online; “summarizing and analyzing privacy policy statements from large social media companies”; “examining usage statements from large internet companies with an integrated proposal project to make ethical changes to protect the privacy of consumers”; “engaging in community activism with social media”; “supporting organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation or the American Civil Liberties Union in their efforts to fight corporate and government surveillance practices”; “watching and critiquing documentaries about these issues” and “developing browser plug-ins to block certain features connected with harmful surveillance and privacy practices.” The strategies Beck provides represent potentially effective ways of paying attention to how websites collect user data. However, such strategies would have questionable effect if implemented as resistance to government surveillance.

Considering that one of the primary concerns of Beck’s 2016 “Writing Educator Responsibilities” is exploring the implications of Snowden’s leaking of documents that expose practices of government surveillance, it is disconcerting that only one of Beck’s implementations
of Selfe’s call to pay attention references government surveillance, specifically. Indeed, the insidious, difficult-to-combat nature of government surveillance is further illustrated by the fact that Beck’s recommended strategy of offering support to organizations that seek to combat government surveillance is not, itself, a form of direct resistance to government surveillance so much as a recommendation to writing professionals to support others in the hope that they may develop a strategy to offer such resistance. As one of the few works of composition studies scholarship that considers the implications of government surveillance overtly (others being Beck’s “The Invisible Digital Identity” and McKee’s “Policy Matters Now,” both of which are reviewed in Chapter II), Beck’s “Writing Educator Responsibilities” performs the important function of drawing writing professionals’ attention to the implications of government surveillance. However, Beck offers little in the way of strategy by which writing professionals may prevent the government’s surveillance of their students’ web use. 8 As a threatening, alien practice, government surveillance disrupts many of the assumptions of composition studies, namely its emphasis on democratic values such as open discourse. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter I: Part One, the mechanisms through which government surveillance operates are subject to little judicial oversight and even less oversight from the public, an ongoing situation that makes it impossible to know if one is being surveilled by the government. 9 As such, while paying attention to policy statements and cookies may empower users to resist practices of corporate surveillance, these strategies do not inform users if the federal government is pulling their data directly from the servers of major web companies.

8 The absence of strategies to combat government surveillance is not pointed out as a failure of Beck’s research, but as an illustration of how difficult it is to foster meaningful understanding of and resistance to government surveillance. Indeed, a core assertion of this thesis is that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any scholar to provide a thorough path of resistance to government surveillance without abandoning the networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.

9 Furthermore, despite Microsoft’s 2016 approved lawsuit against the Federal government to be able to inform its users if their data is being collected, the current status quo is that web companies cannot legally inform their users if they are the subject of government surveillance (Mehrotra, “Microsoft Allowed to Sue U.S. Government”).
Beck’s “The Invisible Digital Identity” illustrates a dilemma that faces all composition studies scholars who embrace Selfe’s call to pay attention to technology as a means of resisting government surveillance and preserve user agency. Despite the potential success of paying attention as a response to corporate surveillance, the secretive nature of government surveillance means that users cannot pay attention to it. While instructors may enact Beck’s advice in “The Invisible Digital Identity” to have their students use AboutAds.info and Ghostery to identify specific ways in which their data is being tracked by the websites they visit every day, no amount of information regarding such tracking will let one know if the government is tapping directly into the servers of those web companies, to say nothing of whose data is being accessed and to what end (131-135). Interestingly, Beck refers to web companies’ surveillance of user data as a process through which such companies “construct an invisible digital identity” for users (135). However, in light of the strategies Beck offers, this invisibility is only temporary because accessible technologies exist through which users can understand how their data is being tracked. As a response to corporate surveillance, Selfe’s call to pay attention performs a vital function in that Selfe spurs writing professionals on to take responsibility for how they are implicated in their technology choices and the technology choices they make for students in the writing classroom, a call to action that underlies Beck’s push toward using available web resources to make one’s “invisible digital identity” visible (135). However, Selfe’s argument to pay attention is effective in response to corporate surveillance precisely because such surveillance is not truly invisible. Though it may be time consuming, writing professionals have the opportunity to adopt strategies like the ones outlined in Beck’s “Writing Educator Responsibilities.” For instance, they may pay attention to web companies’ terms of use and policy statements and use Ghostery and AboutAds.info to determine how web companies are tracking one’s digital data (131-135).
However, despite the efficacy of such strategies in response to corporate surveillance, they are questionable in response to government surveillance, surveillance that, apart from Section 702 of FISA, very little is known about that is not the result of Edward Snowden’s illegal 2013 leaks.

Having examined Selfe’s scholarship and scholarship of the digital that Selfe has influenced, the question remains of what writing professionals may do in response to the threat of government surveillance. Chapter IV discusses the ways in which alien phenomenology may offer a partial answer to the preceding question, an answer that, in many regards, echoes Selfe’s mandate to pay attention, but argues for a form of attentiveness that does not seek to reinscribe democratic humanist notions of agency. According to Ian Bogost, while alien phenomenology holds that “phenomena are objective, often easily measured, recorded, or otherwise identified by some external observer. . . . such an observer cannot have the experience that corresponds with those phenomena, no matter how much evidence he or she might collect from its event horizon” (63). Bogost’s suggestion that observable phenomena share characteristics with black holes is not irrelevant for composition studies’ consideration of the implications of government surveillance. Chapter IV discusses how government surveillance, like a black hole, is not directly visible. Just as a black hole is knowable only through its event horizon, government surveillance is knowable only through materials that do not reflect the mechanism of the surveillance itself. As such, government surveillance illustrates what is, according to alien phenomenology, the ultimately unknowable nature of all objects and object-relations. In other words, no matter how much one pays attention to a phenomenon, government surveillance or otherwise, one will never understand that phenomenon in its entirety. Furthermore, alien phenomenology opens up the possibility that writing professionals may pay attention to government surveillance (as best they can given its unknowable nature) in ways that do not automatically reinscribe democratic
humanist notions of human agency. Finally, Chapter IV suggests that, by paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology, future composition studies scholarship of the digital may cease to assume that human agency is a preservable category as they interact with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.
CHAPTER IV. DISCUSSION

The achieving of phenomenological access to the entities which we encounter, consists rather in thrusting aside our interpretive tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us and running along with us, and which conceal not only the phenomena of such ‘concern’, but even more those entities themselves as encountered of their own accord in our concern with them. (96)

--- Martin Heidegger,
Being and Time

Like a space probe sent out to record, process, and report information, the alien phenomenologist’s carpentry seeks to capture and characterize an experience it can never fully understand, offering a rendering satisfactory enough to allow the artifact’s operator to gain some insight into an alien thing’s experience. (100)

--- Ian Bogost,
Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing

That the recently crossed threshold which leads us into the new century is definitely a very particular boundary is as true as the fact that we do not have a suitable language for that which lies ahead of us. (9)

--- Bernhard Waldenfels,
Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts

The burning warehouse is an object to which no viewpoint does justice. (78)

--- Graham Harman,
Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things

While Selfe and other scholars of digital writing such as Beck have argued for paying attention to technology as a means of resisting ways in which technology threatens human agency, the proliferation of networked digital interfaces such as Microsoft Outlook throughout higher education significantly jeopardizes such attempts to preserve agency because Outlook and other digital interfaces serve as large pools of digital data from which the government secretly draws. The secrecy surrounding government surveillance and the opaque nature of its operation problematize the model of paying attention that underlies much of composition studies’ recent attempts to understand and respond to government surveillance because the practice of paying
attention, as it has been defined by Selfe and more recent digital writing scholars, asserts a correlation between paying attention and preserving agency that is not sustainable while interacting with networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance. Due to the opaque nature of government surveillance, no amount of paying attention will penetrate the wall of secrecy surrounding such surveillance in order for writing professionals to understand the mechanisms through which it operates. Furthermore, the secrecy surrounding government surveillance suggests that the act of paying attention does not necessarily result in increased understanding or increased agency. However, the absence of agency is not, in itself, a reason to cease paying attention.

To the contrary, such absence suggests that writing professionals may no longer assume that the sheer act paying attention to a digital object constitutes a sure path toward increased understanding of and control over that object. Chapter IV explores ways in which alien phenomenology may contribute new perspectives to composition studies scholarship that explores the implications of government surveillance. It is suggested that alien phenomenology may serve as a theoretical lens through which composition studies scholars pay attention to government surveillance without assuming increased agency will be the result of such attention. By embracing the fundamentally alien, unknowable nature of all phenomena, alien phenomenology enables composition studies scholars to pay attention to government surveillance without reinscribing democratic humanist notions of agency. By paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology, composition studies scholars are able to consider the possibility that human agency is not a sustainable category in light of government surveillance and that the act of engaging with the networked digital interface is a dangerous act that cannot be made less so through the rhetoric of human empowerment.
Part One: Microsoft Outlook as Case Study of the Secretive Nature of Government Surveillance

As indicated in Chapter I: Part One, there have been recent attempts on the part of web companies to exercise greater agency in regards to their ability to inform their users if those users are the subject of a government surveillance operation. Most recently, on April 14, 2016, Microsoft Corporation filed a “Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” against the United States government, in which it outlines a rigorous program of secrecy surrounding the government’s request for users’ digital data stored on Microsoft systems. In its lawsuit, Microsoft alleges that, in keeping with Section 2705(b) of the Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA), courts... order Microsoft to keep its customers in the dark when the government seeks their email content or other private information, based solely on a ‘reason to believe’ that disclosure might hinder an investigation. Nothing in the statute requires that the ‘reason to believe’ be grounded in the facts of the particular investigation, and the statute contains no limit on the length of time such secrecy orders may be kept in place. (1)

Through this process of issuing gag orders to Microsoft and other major web companies, the federal government prevents companies from notifying users if the government is accessing their data. Microsoft’s lawsuit against the federal government has received widespread support from other web companies, with Google, Apple, Amazon and Mozilla filing briefs in support of Microsoft’s complaint (Wingfield). Despite the government’s appeal to the Western District of Washington to throw out Microsoft’s lawsuit (“Answer to First Amended Complaint for Declaratory Judgment”), Judge James Robart has set a trial date of June 4, 2018, in which Microsoft’s case will be heard (“Minute Order Setting Trial Dates and Related Dates”). Should Microsoft win this lawsuit, it may set a precedent in which web companies are legally permitted
to disclose government surveillance operations to their users. However, the current, ongoing reality is that Microsoft and other web companies cannot inform their users if said users are the subject of government surveillance. As such, there is currently scant ability for web users to meaningfully understand the ways in which the government collects and uses their digital data.

Unless Judge Robart rules that Microsoft has a right under the First Amendment to “talk to its customers and to discuss how the government conducts its investigations—subject only to restraints narrowly tailored to serve compelling government interests,” Microsoft will be unable to legally inform its users if their digital data is being accessed by the government (“Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” 2). The combination of Section 2705(b) of the ECPA preventing web companies from informing their users of government surveillance and the lack of sustained judicial oversight during surveillance operations sanctioned under Section 702 of FISA forms a legal wall that stands between users of networked digital interfaces and meaningful knowledge of whether or not the government is accessing their data and to what end.

The secrecy that enshrouds practices of government surveillance of users’ digital data is so extensive that it raises serious questions regarding the efficacy of paying attention to government surveillance as a means of preserving one’s agency as one interacts with the networked digital interfaces through which such surveillance occurs. The fact that documents leaked by Snowden identify Microsoft as the first web company to have its servers accessed by the NSA under PRISM, with collection beginning in 2007 (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill), combined with Microsoft’s current lawsuit against the federal government in which it seeks the right to inform users of government surveillance, suggests that the ongoing threat of government surveillance is quite real, a threat that is made all the more alarming due to web users’ current inability to pay meaningful attention to the mechanisms through which such
surveillance operations occur. Taken on its own, Microsoft’s lawsuit testifies to the insidious nature of government surveillance, surveillance that conceals itself within a labyrinthine legal framework that prevents meaningful, in-depth discussion of how government surveillance works and strategies through which users may avoid it. Furthermore, while the act of paying attention to publicly available documents such as Section 702 of FISA, Section 2705(b) of the ECPA and Microsoft’s recent lawsuit against the federal government provides users with a limited understanding of the threat of government surveillance, the results of such attention are drastically limited. Like a black hole, government surveillance cannot be seen directly, but is known only through the occasional bursts of information that fall beyond its “event horizon” (Bogost 63). While paying attention to the event horizon of government surveillance suggests that such surveillance is occurring, the knowledge generated is likely not sufficiently detailed to allow users to either meaningfully understand or avoid government surveillance while continuing to engage with networked digital interfaces that are implicated in such surveillance.

As one of the dominant faces in the unfolding battle between web companies and the U.S. government regarding government surveillance practices, Microsoft is a pertinent example of how the use of common networked digital interfaces threatens users’ agency by subjecting them to the risk of government surveillance. In its current lawsuit against the federal government, Microsoft criticizes the government’s persistent use of gag orders to silence Microsoft from informing users who have been targets of government surveillance:

The vast majority of these secrecy orders related to consumer accounts and prevent Microsoft from telling affected individuals about the government’s intrusion into their personal affairs; others prevent Microsoft from telling business customers that the government has searched and seized the emails of individual employees of the customer.
Further, 1,752 of these secrecy orders contained no time limit, meaning that Microsoft could forever be barred from telling the affected customer about the government’s intrusion. (“Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” 6)

According to its lawsuit, Microsoft regularly receives demands for user information from the government, including access to emails. Such secretive access to users’ digital data is troubling, especially in light of Microsoft’s recent report that there are more than 400 million active users of Microsoft Outlook, the web technology through which Microsoft’s email program operates (“Microsoft by the Numbers”). Widespread use of Microsoft Outlook risks jeopardizing user agency due to the ongoing possibility that users’ data is being accessed by the federal government, a government that, in turn, prevents Microsoft from notifying users that their data is being accessed, potentially ever. Indeed, according to Microsoft, “Over the past 18 months, federal courts have issued nearly 2,600 secrecy orders silencing Microsoft from speaking about warrants and other legal process seeking Microsoft customers’ data; of those, more than two-thirds contained no fixed end date” (“Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” 3).

The government’s silencing of Microsoft is troubling for a variety of reasons. For the purposes of this discussion, however, there are two ways in which the U.S. government’s behavior is especially problematic. First, such restrictions prevent Microsoft from exercising its right to free speech under the First Amendment by notifying users that they are the subject of government surveillance. As such, the government’s gagging of web companies constitutes a violation of the U.S. Constitution. Second, the lack of a “fixed end date” to the government’s gag orders raises the possibility that Microsoft will never be able to inform customers that their data has been accessed by the government, even after the investigation has concluded (“Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” 3). This means that the current lack of transparency that exists in regards
to how the government tracks user data may continue into the future, thereby making meaningful understanding of past, current and future government surveillance practically impossible. While “nearly 2,600 secrecy orders” may not seem like a significant number in light of the hundreds of millions of total Microsoft users, it serves to illustrate the climate of secrecy that surrounds government surveillance of the digital interface more generally, secrecy that makes it difficult if not impossible for users of networked digital interfaces such as Outlook to avoid government surveillance while continuing to use such interfaces (“Complaint for Declaratory Judgment” 3).

Furthermore, the insidious nature of this secrecy is illustrated by the persistence with which the U.S. government combats any attempts to create greater judicial or public oversight in regards to how its surveillance operations are conducted. The practices of secrecy that enshroud government surveillance compound the unconstitutional nature of such surveillance by eroding the legal framework that grants citizens the right to free speech (“The Bill of Rights”).

The large number of Microsoft users, combined with the inability of Microsoft to inform users if they are being surveilled by the government creates a dilemma for institutions of higher education, in part, because Microsoft products are so heavily used in universities throughout the country. For example, the following universities have made Microsoft Outlook their preferred means of electronic communication: The Ohio State University (“University Webmail Services”), Syracuse University (“SUmail”), Boston University (for faculty and staff only) (“Email & Calendaring”), University of Denver (“E-mail”), Michigan State University (for undergraduate students only) (“MSU Email”), University of Miami (“Office 365 Enterprise Email”), University of Missouri (for students only) (“Student Email”), University of Michigan Medical School and Health System (“Setting up Email”), University of South Carolina (“IT Services for Students”; “IT Services for Faculty/Staff”) and University of Louisville (“University
e-mail”). This list contains only a limited selection of the universities that have opted to use Microsoft Outlook as their preferred email client, and it does not begin to skim the surface of the great number of colleges and universities using Microsoft Outlook in a higher education context nationwide. The prevalence of Microsoft Outlook within higher education significantly jeopardizes the agency of students, faculty and administrators because continued use of Microsoft’s web-based products risks subjecting users to government surveillance practices, practices that, due to Section 2705(b) of the ECPA, Microsoft cannot inform users about.

Outlook is only one example of a networked digital interface whose use risks subjecting users to secretive government surveillance. As reported by The Washington Post and The Guardian following Snowden’s 2013 disclosures, in addition to Microsoft, the web companies Apple, Skype, Facebook, YouTube, PalTalk, Google, AOL and Yahoo have had their servers accessed by the NSA in its search for foreign intelligence information, searches that, in keeping with Section 702 of FISA, allow for the interception of U.S. citizens’ digital data in the course of surveillance operations targeting non-U.S. citizens located outside the U.S. (Gellman and Poitras; Greenwald and MacAskill). Snowden’s leaks suggest that several major web companies’ interfaces potentially subject users to government surveillance, interfaces that are commonly used throughout higher education. As indicated in Chapter I: Part One, the accuracy of Snowden’s initial disclosures as reported by The Washington Post and The Guardian is reinforced by statements made by Jaffer and Murphy of the ACLU in their Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee that “the government collects emails, audio and video chats, photographs, and other internet traffic from nine major service providers—Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, PalTalk, AOL, Skype, YouTube, and Apple” (8). The widespread nature of such government surveillance is made even more worrisome when considered in light of
Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper’s 2014 letter to Senator Ron Wyden, in which Clapper confirms that “there have been queries, using U.S. person identifiers, of communications lawfully acquired to obtain foreign intelligence by targeting non U.S. persons reasonably believed to be located outside the U.S. pursuant to Section 702 of FISA” (“Unclassified 702 Response”). In this statement, Clapper confirms that, despite wording in Section 702 that would ostensibly protect U.S. citizens from NSA surveillance through the PRISM program, U.S. citizens’ information has been accessed in the course of surveillance operations targeting foreign citizens. Most recently, the widespread support that Microsoft has received from web companies such as Google, Apple, Amazon and Mozilla, who have all filed briefs in support of Microsoft’s lawsuit against the federal government, suggests that Microsoft’s current battle for greater transparency is one that is shared by the larger community of web companies, with multiple members of this community, themselves, having been implicated in Snowden’s initial disclosures (Wingfield).

In light of the insidious and (pending the outcome of Microsoft’s current lawsuit against the federal government) opaque nature of government surveillance, serious questions exist regarding users’ ability to pay attention to networked digital interfaces in ways that produce detailed understanding of how government surveillance operates, understanding that may then be applied through practices that help one avoid such surveillance. Considered in light of the secrecy surrounding government surveillance, Selfe’s mandate to writing professionals to pay attention to their technology use as a means of preserving human agency even as users interact with increasingly networked digital interfaces falls short as a theoretical method joined with practice. Furthermore, while Beck’s recent application of Selfe’s mandate to pay attention as a response to government surveillance has performed the important function of bringing issues of
government surveillance to the attention of composition studies’ scholarly community, the
efficacy of paying attention as a means of preserving instructor and student agency in the face of
networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance remains doubtful due to the
insidious, secretive nature of such surveillance.

In addition to helping shift scholars’ attention to the implications of government
surveillance for first-year writing, Beck has also helped initiate a discussion of how object-
oriented ontology may provide a theoretical framework through which scholars may better
appreciate the significant role networked digital objects play in shaping human behavior and
discourse. Part Three of this chapter problematizes Beck’s joining of object-oriented ontology
with Selfe’s mandate to pay attention as a means of preserving human agency in the face of
government surveillance practices by suggesting that the greatest merit of object-oriented
ontology and alien phenomenology, more generally, is not that it serves to preserve human
agency in light of government surveillance. To the contrary, alien phenomenology is promising
as a theoretical lens through which to consider government surveillance precisely because it asks
scholars to flatten all phenomena, human and non-human by recognizing that all objects exist
equally. As such, alien phenomenology suggests that government surveillance should be paid
attention to, not as an object that must be overcome, but as an object that may, by reflecting the
observer back at him or herself, provide new understandings of the relationship between human
beings and the networked digital interfaces with which they routinely interact. By paying
attention to government surveillance as an alien object, scholars may cease to assume that paying
attention engenders agency and recognize that the networked digital interface, as illustrated by
government surveillance, is so complex and the mechanisms of its operation so secretive that the
loss of human agency may, at least for the time being, be a consequence of its use. However,
prior to considering ways in which alien phenomenology may open up new paths of
consideration in regards to government surveillance and the networked digital interface, more
generally, it is important to outline the primary theoretical elements of alien phenomenology as a
system of thought.

Part Two: An Overview of Alien Phenomenology

Like Selfe and Selfe influenced composition studies scholarship of the digital, alien
phenomenology places great value on the practice of paying attention. However, whereas
composition studies scholarship of the digital demonstrates a tendency to construct paying
attention as a means of increasing human agency, alien phenomenology articulates a practice of
paying attention that seeks to be more neutral, one that seeks to minimize the unconscious
reinscription of cultural values and, in doing so, open up previously unexplored ways of thinking
in regards to the existence of objects within the phenomenal world and how human beings may
relate and respond to such objects. Whereas Selfe, as demonstrated in Chapter III, subordinates
the act of paying attention to the reinscription of democratic humanist notions of human agency,
a form of reinscription that has questionable value in light of the opaque nature of government
surveillance practices, alien phenomenology seeks to level the ideological playing field by
viewing all objects as existing equally, rather than attempting to privilege the existence of some
objects over others and then naturalize the resulting hierarchy. As such, alien phenomenology is
an attempt to pay attention to objects in order to understand objects for themselves, rather than
through an anthropocentric lens, such as democratic humanism. While alien phenomenologists
claim that the essence of an object, either mental or physical, is never knowable in total, alien
phenomenology is marked by a persistent curiosity in responses to the phenomenal world. By
encouraging curiosity while also recognizing that the objects of one’s curiosity are ultimately
unknownable, alien phenomenology offers a theoretical framework through which writing professionals may continue to pay attention to complex, secretive digital practices such as government surveillance without conflating the act of paying attention with an increase in positive knowledge and, by extension, human agency.

One of the foundational claims of alien phenomenology is that the objects that make up the phenomenal world, both mental and physical, are ultimately unknowable. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Graham Harman characterizes the unknowable nature of phenomena as follows:

> As soon as one accepts that there are multiple relations to the same things, and that neither animate nor inanimate actors are able to sound the depths of their neighbors, the standpoint of object-oriented philosophy has already been established. What lies behind all events are inscrutable tool-beings or substances lying in some sort of still-undetermined vacuum. And somehow, the vacuums must manage to communicate with one another. (78-79)

Harman’s reference to “tool being” hearkens back to “Heidegger’s tool-analysis, with its implicit undermining of all the various perceptual and physical impacts of the hammer in favor of the hammer in its underground reality” (79). Indeed, much of alien phenomenology’s emphasis on the ultimately unknowable nature of phenomena is a modern application of Heidegger’s argument in *Being and Time* that “that which remains hidden . . . is not just this entity or that, but rather the Being of entities . . .” (59). Despite human beings’ attempt to gain knowledge of the phenomenal world, the objects that make up that world withdraw and conceal themselves from the onlooker’s consciousness. As an extension of Heidegger’s phenomenology, Harman’s assertion that the nature of objects is ultimately unknowable carries profound implications
regarding how human beings make sense of the mental and physical objects they encounter. Such a view suggests that human beings, despite their attempts to pay attention to the phenomenal world, can never arrive at absolute knowledge of the objects that make up that world. Furthermore, if one accepts that there are “multiple relations to the same things,” then one must also accept that there is no one understanding or definition of any given thing or any relationship between objects that may be construed as necessary or absolute (Harman 78).

Harman illustrates alien phenomenology’s assertion that the essence of objects is always mysterious and inaccessible to outside observers. As such, alien phenomenology characterizes all objects existing within the phenomenal world as alien to observers. This applies to physical objects as much as mental. For example, Bogost states that “things constantly machinate within themselves and mesh with one another, acting and reacting to properties and states while still keeping something secret. . . . These inner ordinances or formulas of things withdraw; they are not grasped, even if they order perception like an imperative” (27). Bogost identifies a seemingly paradoxical relationship between the thing-in-itself and the thing-in-the-world. While an object exists within a network of relations and thus can be understood in relation to other objects, there is always an element of the object that remains hidden from perception and the human being’s interpretive gaze. As such, every object, according to Bogost, and alien phenomenology more generally, is secretive. Pay attention as one might, every object remains mysterious despite all attempts to define the object in terms of its existence within a network. Bogost uses the metaphor of the black hole to characterize the ultimately unknowable nature of phenomena: “On the one hand, phenomena are objective, often easily measured, recorded, or otherwise identified by some external observer. On the other hand, such an observer cannot have the experience that corresponds with those phenomena, no matter how much evidence he or she might collect from
its event horizon” (63). While empirical observation enables human beings to pay attention to phenomena in order to identify patterns of being, an ability that allows human beings to make judgments about and respond to the objects encountered, alien phenomenology suggests that such observation/response behavior is never more than a pantomime. Human understanding of objects never reaches beyond the perception of those objects to join with the object-in-itself. The practical implication of Bogost’s claim is that, despite one’s seeming familiarity with an object, all phenomena remain fundamentally alien and unknowable in their totality.

While the preceding statements are made primarily in response to human beings’ perception of and response to physical phenomena, alien phenomenology also positions mental phenomena as alien. In *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, Bernhard Waldenfels suggests that mental concepts are as mysterious as physical objects in that any value, no matter how positive, necessarily involves an unstated negation:

The establishment of orders with their legitimacy, including the genealogy of true and false, of good and evil, is neither relatively nor absolutely valid. It is not at all valid, since the fact that there are binary standards is not itself subject to these standards, unless their genesis is once again concealed and the respective opposition is hypostatized. Each order has its blind spot in the form of something unordered that does not merely constitute a deficit. That goes for moral orders as well as for cognitive and aesthetic orders. . . . In other words: the fact of reason is not in itself reasonable. (13)

Waldenfels’ use of the term “order” corresponds in many respects with Bourdieu’s theory of habitus as examined in Chapter III. For Waldenfels, orders of value do not correspond to objectively existing orders that exist in-themselves, but instead exist as part of a network in much the same way that physical objects exist within, are conditioned by and, in turn, condition a
network of objects. Significantly, Waldenfels echoes Harman and Bogost’s characterization of objects as ultimately unknowable in that, while an order of value may be subjected to discourse, there is always an element of a given order that is obscured so that the order may exist. This “blind spot” may be characterized as a hidden assumption within the order regarding the structure of the phenomenal world (13), a fundamental, underlying assumption that, like Bogost’s “event horizon” is impossible to know absolutely, regardless of how much human beings attempt to pay attention to it (63). For alien phenomenology, all objects, mental and physical, are ultimately unknowable because they contain an element that is inaccessible to outside observation.

Within alien phenomenology, the unknowable nature of phenomena is wrapped up with concepts of leveling and flat ontology in which all objects are thought to exist equally. In The Democracy of Objects, Levi Bryant states “that being is flat” and that “entities at all levels of scale, whether natural or cultural, physical or artificial, material or semiotic are on equal ontological footing” (279). Bryant asserts that alien phenomenology, as embodied within object-oriented ontology, “democratizes being, asserting not one primary gap between subjects and objects, humans and world, mind and reality, but rather an infinity of gaps or vacuums between objects regardless of whether humans are involved” (279-280). Echoing statements made by Harman, Bogost and Waldenfels, Bryant resists the tendency of humanist thought to position human beings and human perception as the arbiters of objects’ value. Rather than reinforcing a hierarchy in which phenomena are valued in regards to human perception, Bryant suggests that all objects exist equally. Harman, too, levels the relationships between human and non-human objects, writing that “the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is no different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other” (1). This statement
expands out of Harman’s more general critique of Western philosophy for locating its “primary interest” in “human access to” objects, rather than the objects themselves (1). Like Bryant, Harman seeks to rupture anthropocentric conceptions of the phenomenal world that privilege human existence or human-focused relationships over all others. Through this process of leveling, alien phenomenologists resist the human tendency to privilege certain relationships between objects over other relationships, especially when such privileging perpetuates binary oppositions such as that maintained between the human and non-human.

Alien phenomenology’s emphasis upon leveling the existence of objects resists the tendency to assert the existence of binary oppositions and then naturalize such oppositions in order to structure discourse. Bryant’s emphasis on flat ontology, for instance, problematizes the structuring power of binaries such as good and evil, mind and body or, in a binary that significantly structures composition studies scholars’ understanding of networked digital technology, agency and oppression. Furthermore, in the absence of such structuring binaries, conventional methods of creating knowledge of objects are significantly problematized. When objects cease to be considered through the structuring lens of binary oppositions, the meaning of those objects, which had heretofore felt so solid, begins to recede from the observing consciousness. According to Bryant, “Far from the gap between humans and objects constituting a unique form of relation, withdrawal is a perfectly ubiquitous relation within being characteristic of all relations to one another regardless of whether or not humans are involved in these relations. Moreover, all objects are strange strangers with respect to themselves” (280). When human-centric binaries cease to be privileged as structuring lenses through which to view the phenomenal world, it becomes more difficult if not impossible to sustain views of the world in which human beings are privileged over other phenomena.
When considered in light of Bryant and other alien phenomenologists’ assertion that there are no essential relationships between objects, correlations of value such as that found in Selfe’s argument to pay attention may be difficult to sustain. As demonstrated in Chapter III, Selfe’s mandate to writing professionals to pay attention to the implications of their technology use presupposes that the act of paying attention exists in a causal relationship with agency, a relationship in which practicing the former increases the latter. However, when evaluated in light of alien phenomenology’s deprivileging of relationships through flat ontology, Selfe’s argument loses a certain amount of its rhetorical power. In the absence of privileged binaries, there is no reason to assume that the act of paying attention correlates to increased agency or to anything, for that matter, because there is no necessary relationship between the two concepts, just as no necessary relationships exist between any objects. Far from constituting a relationship that is essential, much less causal, composition studies’ privileging of human agency as a necessary result of paying attention to networked digital technology dramatizes the democratic humanist narrative as applied to the digital frontier, a frontier that, like space itself, threatens to suck the life out of humanism, altogether. By de-essentializing the essential values that dominate democratic humanist narratives of composition, alien phenomenology allows scholars to consider a world that is neither human nor inhuman because the binary between such categories has ceased to exist.

However, despite alien phenomenology’s vision of the flat existence of objects and its promise to open up new perspectives and understandings by not treating culturally reinscribed binaries as sacred, alien phenomenology does not assert that human beings can completely escape binary thinking or completely step outside of culture in order to understand objects-in-themselves. According to alien phenomenology, such binaries, once internalized, are pervasive
in their structuring of human understanding and human discourse of the phenomenal world, and the mere recognition that objects exist equally does not serve to propel human thought out of its binary constraints through which it privileges some phenomena over others. In a statement reminiscent of Bourdieu’s characterization of the habitus, Waldenfels writes, “There is no place beyond cultures which could grant us an unbiased and unrestrained overview” (70). As such, even though alien phenomenology fosters engagement with objects that is less ideologically-loaded due to its rejection of structuring binaries such as human/non-human and good/evil, alien phenomenology does not allow for total knowledge of objects-in-themselves. Far from responding to the ultimate unknowability of an object with despair, however, alien phenomenology revels in the mysterious nature of all phenomena, and it celebrates human curiosity that seeks to understand objects-in-themselves, knowing full-well that such understanding is impossible.

Even though alien phenomenology does not allow for observers to ever know an object-in-itself, one of the dominant attributes of alien phenomenology is its persistent emphasis upon human curiosity in seeking encounters with the phenomenal world. Waldenfels describes this drive toward curiosity poignantly: “The alien as alien requires a responsive form of phenomenology that begins with that which challenges us, calls upon us, or puts our own possibilities in question in an alienating, shocking, or amazing fashion before we enter into our own wanting-to-know and wanting-to-understand situation. . . . What we need is a shift of weight and a new orientation which opens up new paths” (36). In this passage, Waldenfels articulates alien phenomenology’s view that curiosity is rooted in the ability of objects in the phenomenal world to disrupt traditional ways of knowing, a disruption that, while potentially experienced as violent, may incite one to question previously held assumptions about the phenomenal world
and, as a result of such questioning, may make possible new ways of thinking about and experiencing oneself, the world, its objects and the relationships between those objects.

The violence that can accompany confrontation between the conventional and the alien is a recurring theme of alien phenomenology. According to Waldenfels, “Violence . . . appears as an alien matter which tears apart the existent structures of meaning” (33). However, what is perceived as violence is really the rapid restructuring of phenomena, restructuring that is experienced as violent because it transforms currently existing, entrenched structures into ones that are new. As with any transformation, it comes at the cost of the previous incarnation’s existence: a process of transformation that may be experienced as threatening by the object that is transformed, especially if such transformation occurs within an intellectual milieu in which human beings are privileged as subjects and the act of paying attention is correlated with increased agency and empowerment in regards to the subject’s relationship to the objects in the phenomenal world. As Waldenfels’ statements suggest, alien phenomenology does not seek to privilege human existence over the existence of other phenomenal objects. To the contrary, alien phenomenology’s practice of paying attention constitutes, not an attempt to gain greater control over the phenomenal world, but a sustained practice of curiosity in which one attempts to understand objects for themselves and in-themselves, while also knowing that the existence of objects is ultimately inaccessible and that the act of paying attention does not automatically correlate to any particular result, such as increased agency, due to the flattened, unprivileged nature of all objects and object-relations.

While alien phenomenology insists that phenomena cannot be known in-themselves, it emphasizes the importance of curiosity and cautions against the dangers of taking any metaphorical relationship too seriously. Bogost writes, “Among the consequences of semiotic
obsession is an overabundant fixation on argumentation, such that pedantry replaces curiosity” (91). Given the flattened nature of all objects within the alien phenomenological perspective, it follows that one should avoid overly-fixed understandings of the world and the relations existing between the objects that constitute it. As such, just as no single binary should be privileged over other relationships, no single narrative is to be privileged over any other, appeals to objectivity notwithstanding. Bogost suggests, “Counterintuitive though it may seem, the characterization of an experience through supposedly objective evidence and external mechanisms leads us farther from, not closer to, an understanding of the experience of an entity” (63). In other words, despite the inability of human beings to arrive at absolute knowledge of any given thing or relationship between objects, the exercise of curiosity enables human beings to come closer to such knowledge, whereas any attempt at privileging some objects or object-relations over others creates distance between human beings and the objects or object-relations they seek to understand. For alien phenomenology, paying attention constitutes an act of curiosity in which one seeks understanding of a thing, knowing full-well that nothing can ever be fully understood.

With its celebration of curiosity, combined with its emphasis upon flattened object relations, alien phenomenology stands out as a promising theoretical framework through which composition studies scholars may consider the implications of government surveillance without assuming that the act of paying attention to the networked digital interfaces implicated in such surveillance will enable scholars to increase human agency by generating detailed knowledge of the mechanisms through which such surveillance operates. However, despite recent investigation within composition studies scholarship concerning how alien phenomenology may open new pathways of consideration regarding the implications of government surveillance, the conclusions drawn from such investigation continue to privilege the dominant assumption that
the sheer act of paying attention to technology exists in a causal relationship with increased empowerment in regards to how one uses that technology. As one of the pioneers within composition studies currently considering the ways in which alien phenomenology may provide greater insight into the implications of government surveillance for the networked writing classroom, Estee Beck’s scholarship illustrates both the promise of alien phenomenology as a theoretical lens and the potential for that lens, instead of disrupting dominant narratives within composition studies scholarship, to actually reinscribe them.

Part Three: Beck’s Application of Alien Phenomenology to Government Surveillance

While touched upon in Chapters Two and Three, Beck’s “The Invisible Digital Identity” represents one of the most developed articulations of the role alien phenomenology may play as a theoretical framework through which to consider the implications of government surveillance for first-year writing. As such, Beck’s research demands more in-depth consideration in order to further appreciate the ways in which alien phenomenology may open up new pathways of consideration for writing professionals attempting to make sense of government surveillance and its consequences for the networked writing classroom. However, close study of Beck’s use of object-oriented ontology suggests that more investigation is needed in order to more fully appreciate the potential for alien phenomenology to disrupt composition studies’ ingrained narratives regarding technology within the classroom. Reinforcing Selfe’s argument in Technology and Literacy, Beck suggests that paying attention to technology correlates to the increased agency of users even in response to surveillance practices such as those conducted by the U.S. government. Beck’s claim demands reconsideration in that her assertion that the act of paying attention exists in a causal relationship with increased empowerment underestimates both
the extent to which alien phenomenology’s concept of flat ontology deprivileges relationships between objects and the pervasive secrecy of government surveillance, itself.

Though Beck’s argument ultimately asserts a correlation between paying attention and increased agency, one of the foundational elements of that assertion lies in Beck’s use of object-oriented ontology and its emphasis upon flat ontology. Building upon ideas forwarded by Harman, Bogost and Bryant, Beck “argue[s] that digital rhetoricians and digital writing teachers need a theory that places both objects and humans in the same ontological state that helps shift toward seeing objects as equal in force and weight as humans” (135). Such leveling is exactly what alien phenomenology stands to accomplish through its assertion that all objects exist equally and through its resistance to reductive tendencies to privilege some objects or object-relations over others, a process that creates a hierarchy that risks obscuring the objects-in-themselves more than they already are. For Beck, alien phenomenology’s flattening of phenomena opens up the possibility that writing professionals may come to see that agency is not a uniquely human attribute, but is shared with the digital objects humans create.

Beck is “concerned about what is unknown to” her, and she explores the potential for alien phenomenology to serve as a framework through which the unknown may come to be known (135). According to Beck, the increasingly complex nature of “networked culture” is such that composition studies scholars are in need of “a theory that moves past a binary between humans and objects as tools,” a theory that “helps usher in new lines of research and conversations about object agency” (135). By asserting that objects have agency, Beck highlights the increasingly powerful role networked digital objects play in the world and the great impact these objects’ activities can have on human life. Furthermore, Beck’s emphasis upon the agency of digital objects echoes alien phenomenology’s leveling of phenomena by ceasing to privilege
certain object-relations over others, in this case the humanist assumption that agency is a uniquely human attribute. Indeed, Beck goes so far as to argue that the very code that makes up the digital terrain “not only has suasive properties, but also is rhetorical in nature. . . . The objects not only have an existence, but also provide data and persuade other codes and people to act” (136-137). Beck argues for object-oriented ontology as a theoretical framework through which writing scholars may pay better attention to networked digital objects and, by paying attention, resist the tendency for such objects to weaken human agency.

Beck’s positioning of object-oriented ontology as a theoretical lens through which composition studies may pay better attention to networked digital objects participates in an intellectual tradition in which it is assumed that the sheer act of paying attention to technology results in greater empowerment in regards to one’s use of that technology. According to this narrative, technology is inescapable and must be confronted through the weaponry of paying attention. Just as Selfe asserts that, despite attempts to opt out of networked digital technology, citizens “are still intimately involved in a web of technological choices, many of which they fail to recognize” (37), Beck argues that “digital users and writers of the Internet cannot simply ignore the globalized political economy that so heavily relies upon computer code and architecture, and thereby shapes online discourse and design patterns” (137). Given the increasingly networked nature of the digital frontier, both Selfe and, more recently, Beck assert that citizens cannot simply opt out of networked digital technology. In other words, digital objects have permeated human life and act on human beings in ways that are difficult to detect. In light of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of citizens completely opting out of networked digital technology, Beck argues that, “[a]s digital rhetoricians and as digital writing teachers, we can become better informed about invisible digital identities” (137). Beck offers object-oriented
ontology as a theoretical framework through which writing professionals may better understand “how material and immaterial objects operate behind the networked veil, and in turn, inform our students who write in online spaces” (137). As such, Beck’s application of object-oriented ontology serves to reinforce a narrative in which increased user agency is positioned as the result of paying attention to technology, a narrative that suggests that government surveillance can be meaningfully understood and resisted.

According to Beck, the inclusion of object-oriented ontology as a theoretical framework through which to consider issues of surveillance is one that enhances agency by allowing writing professionals to better understand the power of digital objects and their ability to affect the lives of human beings. Furthermore, Beck argues that developing better understanding of the mechanisms through which digital surveillance occurs may help writing professionals “look at” the networked digital interfaces they interact with “and decide whether the companies who use third-party elements do so in a way that lines up with our notions of privacy and data sharing on the web” (137). Beck goes even further to assert that the act of paying attention to digital objects enables users to “develop agency as well as a new understanding of digital literacy—crucial steps that can lead to empowerment and protection in online spaces” (137). As such, Beck presents object-oriented ontology as a means through which writing professionals may better understand and, as a result of this increased understanding, resist networked digital practices such as government surveillance.

However, while paying attention may be effective as a response to corporate surveillance, it is unclear how successful this strategy is as a response to government surveillance. Whereas one may pay attention to corporate surveillance through artifacts such as terms-of-use agreements, government surveillance, with its largely unknowable mechanisms of operation, is
difficult, if not impossible to pay attention to and accumulate detailed knowledge of. Furthermore, Beck’s application of alien phenomenology as a theoretical framework through which increased attention may be given to digital objects does not consider the full implications of alien phenomenology’s emphasis upon flat ontology. Indeed, through its concept of flat ontology, alien phenomenology deprivileges all narratives that perform a structuring function within a given discourse. As such, composition studies’ dominant narrative that the act of paying attention exists in a causal relationship with increased empowerment can no longer be given the a priori value it has been afforded within composition studies scholarship of the digital.

While Beck’s “The Invisible Digital Identity” is responsible for joining consideration of the implications of government surveillance for first-year writing with the theoretical framework of alien phenomenology, Beck’s correlation of the act of paying attention with the increased agency of users is not a necessary conclusion of alien phenomenology. To the contrary, considered through the lens of alien phenomenology, the ongoing threat of government surveillance, a practice that pervades the networked digital interface while remaining largely secret, suggests that human agency may not be a preservable category as users interact with interfaces implicated in such surveillance. Whereas Beck suggests that, as a result of Snowden’s revelations, “it has become increasingly important for people to know how governments, companies, and organizations may or may not participate in the ‘mean world’ Internet,” one of the lessons of alien phenomenology is that no object can be known absolutely and that no relationship between objects is more essential than any other (128). As such, the initial act of paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology is just as likely to suggest that agency can be preserved as it is to suggest that agency is not sustainable as a category in light of government surveillance. Indeed, any attempt to pay attention to an object,
digital or otherwise, that approaches said object with the intention of subordinating it to a predetermined set of values does not constitute an act of paying attention as it is understood within alien phenomenology. Because objects and the relationships between objects are unknowable and because no object or relationship exists more fully than any other, alien phenomenology asks scholars to pay attention to objects with as few preconceptions as possible in the hope that doing so may open up new pathways of thought, pathways that may not be possible while subordinating the object to a preconceived set of values and expectations.

Part Four of this chapter considers the phenomenon of government surveillance and the networked digital interfaces implicated in such surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology. It is suggested that composition studies scholars can no longer assume that increased agency is the necessary result of the act of paying attention. Indeed, by paying attention to government surveillance through the lens of alien phenomenology, composition studies scholars may more openly consider the possibility that the act of paying attention to the networked digital interface does not necessarily increase human agency at all. To the contrary, alien phenomenology allows for the possibility that the act of engaging with networked digital interfaces constitutes a sacrificial act in which one forfeits an immeasurable amount of control. As such, the networked writing classroom constitutes a conflicted space in which the agency of instructors and students, alike, is continually threatened.

**Part Four: Always Already in the Midst of the Alien:**

**Government Surveillance Considered through the Lens of Alien Phenomenology**

Considered within the framework of alien phenomenology, the purpose of paying attention to government surveillance is not necessarily to increase agency through resistance, but to open up new pathways of consideration in response to such surveillance practices. However,
as with many situations in which one feels powerless, the admission of one’s lack of agency in the face of the alien can, paradoxically, lead one to discover sources of empowerment previously unconsidered. Interfaces such as Microsoft Outlook are so interwoven into the infrastructure of higher education that it may be difficult for writing professionals and the rest of the campus community to imagine their absence. However, by considering such interfaces through the lens of alien phenomenology, one may accept the possibility that, considered within a flattened phenomenology in which all objects and object-relations are equal, networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance may be modified or replaced by interfaces that work to prevent such surveillance from occurring. In other words, if it is known that the interfaces that administrators, faculty and students are being asked to engage with are implicated in government surveillance, then there is no legitimate reason to continue to use those interfaces in ways that endanger the privacy (agency) of users. For example, in the aftermath of Snowden’s 2013 leaks, alternative digital practices such as end-to-end encryption have been considered in response to the threatening, alien nature of web technology.

In the face of alien practices of government surveillance, it follows that one cannot assume that agency is a preservable category as users engage with increasingly complex networked digital interfaces. However, end-to-end encryption stands out as a form of technological resistence, not just to government surveillance, but to the potential for anyone to eavesdrop on one’s electronic communications. As such, writing professionals may explore the potential for end-to-encryption to prevent all unwanted parties from accessing one’s digital exchanges, a practice that is rooted in a vision of the internet as an alien, conflicted space. In

Credit must be given to Adam Houser who, in a series of questions and comments in response to a brief presentation of this thesis at the University of Findlay’s 2017 Symposium for Scholarship & Creativity, illuminated end-to-encryption as a strategy through which users may safeguard the content of their electronic communication.
“Mass Surveillance and Technological Policy Options: Improving Security of Private Communications,” Stephen Schuster et al. assert that

[t]he foremost short-term technical option recommended for ensuring data security and privacy is encryption. A consistent and sufficiently strong encryption of both, [sic] the transmitted data (content) and the transmission channel guarantees a secure data exchange between two endpoints, also called end-to-end encryption (E2EE). . . . When E2EE messages are encrypted on the sender’s device and decrypted on the recipient’s device, telecom providers, ISPs and service providers such as Google, Facebook, Tencent or Microsoft only see encrypted information. Thus, these companies cannot disclose (read-able) copies to government agencies, even with a court order. (78)

Schuster et al. identify E2EE as a means by which web users may transmit electronic communications securely without fear that the content of those communications may be accessed by the government. As such, it represents one of the most compelling responses to, not only government surveillance, but any attempts by third parties to access one’s electronic communication.

However, end-to-end encryption stands out as an intriguing response to government surveillance, not only due to its potential power as a means of securing one’s electronic communication, but also due to its underlying assumption that all networked technology constitutes conflicted territory. Rather than constituting a strategy through which government surveillance, in particular, may be resisted, E2EE resists government surveillance by assuming that all networked digital interfaces are subject to surveillance, indeed, that the internet as a whole is a frontier in which the electronic voyager’s privacy is always already at risk. As a vision of the networked digital frontier, E2EE carries profound implications in that it takes as its
starting point the assumption that all networked digital interfaces are invasive and threaten user privacy. However, while E2EE has clear potential to increase web users’ privacy and, by extension, agency in response to the threat of government surveillance, significant hurdles must be overcome before its use replaces the digital infrastructure that currently dominates, not just the digital writing classroom, but institutions of higher education, in general.

Attempts are continually being made to improve the ease with which web users transition into using E2EE as the default platform for their electronic exchanges, and Schuster et al. identify several web resources that users may consider as they explore the possibilities of E2EE. According to Schuster et al.,

Strong cryptographic software is available to those who want to use it, as E2EE software has existed since the 1980s. Such software includes PGP (e-mail encryption software released in 1991), OTR (‘Off the Record’, for secure instant messaging), Internet telephony apps like SilentPhone, Signal, or DIME (aka Dark Mail) and specific plug-ins for Chrome, Firefox and other browsers. Newer E2EE tools do not only encrypt data, but also encrypt metadata (e.g. DIME and ProtonMail). (79)

These claims regarding the potential for E2EE to enable the secure transfer of electronic communications are supported by statements made by ProtonMail, itself: “we don't have the technical ability to decrypt your messages, and as a result, we are unable to hand your data over to third parties” (“Security”). However, despite the promise of E2EE to foster more secure digital communication, it remains unclear how this digital practice may be applied on an institution-wide scale within a higher education context. For instance, it is unclear whether interfaces such as ProtonMail will need to replace government surveillance-implicated interfaces such as Microsoft Outlook entirely or if implicated interfaces may be used in ways that eliminate the
threat of the government accessing user content. Writing professionals who are concerned with the loss of privacy that currently accompanies instructors and students’ use of the networked digital interface may evaluate the feasibility of such a widespread incorporation of E2EE at the institutional level, as well as the more effective form such a change should take.\textsuperscript{11} However, even if E2EE interfaces were to be adopted on an institutional level, there are indications that even the extensive efforts of E2EE are not sufficient to guarantee the absolute privacy of user data.

While E2EE is promising in its potential to prevent the interception of digital communication, it is, as with so many attempts to increase one’s digital security, not a perfect solution to the problem of government surveillance. In “Hacker Lexicon: What Is End-to-End Encryption?” Andy Greenberg outlines ways in which third parties may gain access to the content of users’ electronic messages despite those messages being transmitted through an end-to-end encrypted interface. For example, Greenberg asserts that “[e]ach user’s computer can still be hacked to steal his or her cryptographic key or simply read the recipients’ decrypted messages. Even the most perfectly encrypted communication pipe is only as secure as the mailbox on the other end.” Greenberg’s assertion is troubling in light of the possibility of E2EE being implemented on an institutional level in a higher education context. Even if networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance were to be used in ways or be replaced by other interfaces that promote secure communication through E2EE, vulnerabilities still exist that jeopardize any resulting security.

As suggested by Greenberg, one such vulnerability is the risk of either a sender or receiver of an encrypted communication’s computer being compromised in ways that allow a third party to decrypt the content of the exchange. To be sure, this possibility alone does not undermine the value of E2EE altogether or suggest that it should not be implemented on an institutional level.

\textsuperscript{11} To some extent, Estee Beck has already started this discussion in “The Invisible Digital Identity” (138).
institutional level. However, the potential for even supremely secure web strategies such as E2EE to be circumvented by third parties illustrates the alien nature of the networked digital interface and the increasing importance of engaging with such interfaces in ways that assume neither the safety of one’s data nor the preservation of one’s agency. Thus, even if security strategies such as E2EE are to be adapted on an institutional level, such adaptation must remain self-critical. Just as the assumption underlying E2EE is that all of one’s electronic communication may be intercepted by unwanted third parties and, therefore, must be encrypted, with access only being provided to sender(s) or intended recipient(s), the porous, alien nature of the networked digital interface obliges educators to approach the web as a conflicted space, in which user agency is always already at risk.

This thesis has considered the ways in which writing professionals and students’ use of common networked digital interfaces threatens to subject them to government surveillance, surveillance that, due to its covert nature, cannot be understood or resisted, at least not in the same ways practices such as corporate surveillance may be understood and resisted. The alien nature of government surveillance demands composition studies scholars pay attention, not in an effort to preserve human agency within an existing digital infrastructure or in accordance with democratic humanist notions of empowerment, but in order to better understand ways in which government surveillance renders the preservation of human agency uncertain within that structure. While digital strategies such as E2EE may be considered in the ongoing fight against government surveillance, writing professionals would be wise to remain critical of such strategies. Given the increasingly complex, networked nature of the digital interface, it must be approached for what it is: an alien network that, like all phenomena, resists human understanding and control.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The best possible time to contest for what the posthuman means is now, before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them.

Although some current versions of the posthuman point toward the antihuman and the apocalyptic, we can craft others that will be conducive to the long-range survival of humans and of the other life-forms, biological and artificial, with whom we share the planet and ourselves.

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-- N. Katherine Hayles,
*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. (42)

Friedrich Nietzsche,
“On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. (72)

-- H.P. Lovecraft,
“The Call of Cthulhu”

The threat of government surveillance constitutes a dramatic challenge to the values of democracy that are so cherished within the field of composition studies. The lack of judicial oversight implied by Section 702 of FISA, combined with a lack of public oversight due to its secretive nature, effectively erects a wall around the mechanisms through which government surveillance occurs and prevents writing professionals, students and web users, in general, from cultivating meaningful understanding of the ways in which the government may be tracking and storing their digital data. Like a black hole yawning in the midst of the internet, the government devours users’ digital data, using it in ways and for purposes that remain ever mysterious, and no amount of paying attention stands to make it less so. Like some god of the alien, government surveillance is ever-present but always hidden, and, housed within its pyramid of legal mystery, it operates in shadow. While this characterization of the U.S. government’s surveillance practices...
may seem somewhat paranoid, the pervasive nature of government surveillance, indeed, the conflicted nature of the web, itself, is such that a certain level of paranoia may be a rational response. Simply put: the networked digital interface is neither democratic nor humanist, even if the cultural and intellectual milieu in which it is used and discussed claims to be. As such, the field of composition studies must grapple with the contradiction between its carefully constructed democratic humanist ethos and the electronic means through which that ethos flows.  

Given the indecipherable nature of government surveillance, it follows that it cannot be paid attention to, at least not in the way corporate surveillance may be, as in the case of websites’ terms-of-use statements. Furthermore, the employment of strategies that resist corporate surveillance in the form of websites’ tracking of user data does not prevent the government from accessing user data directly from the servers of major web companies, companies such as Microsoft that are responsible for much of the electronic communication occurring in higher education and throughout the world. In light of the insidious, secretive nature of government surveillance, it follows that networked digital technology must be considered a potential threat to users’ agency. As such, the networked writing classroom constitutes a conflicted space. By approaching the writing classroom as an alien space that contains networked digital interfaces which threaten student agency, writing professionals may open up new pathways of consideration and strategies for engaging with networked digital technology.

However, while it may be impossible to pay meaningful attention to government surveillance due to its covert nature, writing professionals can, in the spirit of alien

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12 It goes without saying that this thesis is not exempt from the preceding critique. Composed using Microsoft Word and based on feedback that has freely flowed, minus end-to-end encryption, via the interface of Microsoft Outlook, this project is both a critique and illustration of the pervasive nature of networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.
phenomenology, pay attention to the “event horizon” that surrounds it (Bogost 63). As a metaphor for government surveillance, Bogost’s language of the black hole illustrates the difficulty with which writing professionals attempt to pay attention to networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance, interfaces that are rendered opaque due to the legal walls that surround the mechanisms through which such surveillance operates. However, while the perimeter of government surveillance cannot be considered directly, the discussions occurring outside its walls may be investigated, discussions that include legally visible aspects of government surveillance such as the documents that make up FISA, Microsoft’s lawsuit against the government and even former Director of National Intelligence, Clapper’s statements in response to Snowden’s 2013 leaks. To some extent, this thesis represents a first step in the direction of gaining a firmer understanding of the legal context surrounding government surveillance in the hope of more clearly determining where users stand in relation to such surveillance practices, even if a concrete vision of government surveillance is not currently possible. While the conclusion this thesis draws from paying attention to surveillance legislation may not be the most optimistic in that it argues for users’ current inability to cultivate meaningful understanding of how such surveillance occurs, it does highlight the future possibility that Microsoft and other web companies will be able to inform their users if they are being subjected to surveillance. Steps such as the one being taken in Microsoft’s lawsuit against the U.S. government are promising moves in a more transparent direction that stands to empower users to make more informed decisions in regards to networked digital interfaces implicated in government surveillance.

While this thesis makes some strides toward better understanding the legal contexts in which government surveillance operates, the rapidly transforming nature of the legal terrain
surrounding government surveillance is such that future research must continually work to
remain abreast of any changes. For example, it is important that writing professionals who are
concerned with the implications of digital surveillance remain current in regards to Microsoft’s
legal battle, as well as all legislation relating to the government’s surveillance practices. Given
the complex, networked nature of today’s writing classroom, it is important that writing
professionals keep track of the legal contexts surrounding the digital interfaces they ask students
to engage with, especially in regards to how the seemingly innocent act of asking students to
utilize interfaces such as Microsoft Outlook may subject students and everyone that student
electronically corresponds with to government surveillance. This is not to suggest, however, that
the act of paying attention to the discussion surrounding government surveillance is, in itself, a
sure path toward increased instructor and student empowerment in response to such surveillance.
Indeed, as this thesis reflects, the act of paying attention to government surveillance reveals that
meaningful understanding of the mechanisms through which such surveillance operates is
impossible to attain given its covert nature.

Educating oneself regarding the legal environment of government surveillance is not
sufficient as a means of resisting such surveillance practices. Regardless of how much second-
hand knowledge writing professionals accumulate regarding the legal framework through which
government surveillance operates, it is not legally possible to pay attention to the inner workings
of government surveillance itself. The opaque nature of government surveillance illustrates alien
phenomenology’s assertion that the phenomenal world resists humanity’s totalizing gaze in that
every object contains elements that can never be fully perceived or understood. As an alien,
disruptive practice that hides in plain sight in networked writing classrooms throughout the
nation, government surveillance renders the computerized classroom, itself, an alien, conflicted
space. In light of the ever-present threat of students’ data being tracked and stored through the use of college and university-approved interfaces such as Microsoft Outlook in the writing classroom, it follows that the governing bodies that oversee first-year writing should draw attention to the danger government surveillance poses to student privacy.

By drawing attention to the ways “publishing and assessment companies” may mishandle student data, the NCTE’s 2016 “Resolution” is a promising move toward increased scrutiny of the ways in which the networked writing classroom may threaten student privacy. However, as this thesis illustrates, threats to student privacy extend beyond the education companies implicated in the NCTE’s resolution and encompass many of the interfaces writing professionals and students interact with every day, both in the performance of their duties and in their private lives. If the governing bodies of composition accept the NCTE’s mandate that “we must work collaboratively to ensure that privacy rights and data safeguards are enacted to protect students and families in schools, colleges, and universities,” then they must also accept the importance of educating students concerning the risks that accompany engagement with the networked writing classroom (“Resolution”).

Even if one accepts that government surveillance cannot be paid attention to due to its covert nature, alien phenomenology allows writing professionals to foster curiosity regarding such surveillance practices, curiosity that may manifest in unpredictable forms of understanding and responding. However, the first step toward cultivating new understandings of the alien is to allow the alien into one’s home, indeed, to admit that it has always already been there, whether that home be the writing classroom or the body of position statements created by oversight organizations such as the NCTE, CWPA or the CCCC. By directly addressing the networked writing classroom as a space that is implicated in government surveillance, writing studies’
governing bodies may foster diverse considerations of the role of government surveillance in the classroom and the extent to which the networked writing classroom is rendered a conflicted space for student agency as a result of such surveillance practices.\textsuperscript{13}

Future writing studies scholarship should consider government surveillance as a dramatic example of the ways in which networked digital technology jeopardizes user agency. By treating all networked technology as alien and potentially threatening, writing professionals may draw attention to the conflicted nature of digital composition, itself, a form of composition that implicates educators and students alike in varied, complex digital practices that, like all phenomena, recoil at the penetrative gaze of the human mind and which do not privilege human-centric interpretations of objects or object-relations, democratic, humanist, or otherwise. Indeed, though composition studies scholars are correct to assert that all networked digital interfaces, as the products of human beings, are inscribed with and reinscribe cultural values, future scholarship should not assume that all technology is the expression of human will. As Beck asserts (likely prophetically) that “objects not only have an existence, but also provide data and persuade other codes and people to act,” she draws attention to the potential for digital objects to operate according to processes of inner-logic that are increasingly complex and mysterious (“The Invisible Digital Identity” 137). In light of the increasingly complex, powerful and mysterious nature of the networked digital interface, government surveillance may only be a harbinger of a new norm in which web users can no longer assume that they retain control over their digital data or even that such control is possible as human beings explore the alien terrain of the digital frontier.

\textsuperscript{13} As Beck points out in “Writing Educator Responsibilities,” the Electronic Frontier Foundation is another resource the composition studies community may look to as it attempts to navigate the alien terrain of web technology. However, though resources like the EFF and the ACLU help to draw attention to digital threats like government surveillance, the mechanisms through which such surveillance occurs remain hidden from observation, as does the means of preventing it.
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