ABSTRACT

PLEASE TYPE HERE: DIGITAL PETITIONS AND THE INTERSECTIONS OF THE WEB AND DEMOCRACY

by Erin L. Brock

This thesis describes a study that investigates the assumptions, rhetorical strategies, and genre characteristics demonstrated by online petitions and two websites that host them—We the People and MoveOn Petitions. Chapter One consists of a literature review of democratic and public sphere theories, as well as a description of the two websites of interest. Chapter Two investigates the impact of digital circulation on the function and form of the genre. Chapter Three describes a visual analysis of the home pages and creation templates of each site, while Chapter Four contains a critical discourse analysis of a sample of petitions. The project concludes with a chapter that outlines the findings of the study, supplemented by a discussion of the affordances and constraints of the genre. I argue that online petitions are complex digital texts that reveal varied and often complicated attitudes towards democracy, and that online petitions are their own genre due to their circulation patterns. Ultimately, this project provides insight on a form of digital public writing valuable in a variety of contexts, including first-year composition classrooms.
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CHAPTER ONE:
MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND STYLES OF DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees citizens the right to petition the government if they believe that their rights have been infringed upon unjustly. Though this clause refers to a citizen’s right to petition the government through official means, petitioning has actually been used in a variety of contexts to address both political and personal problems. In fact, the act has a long cultural legacy that dates back to several societies around the globe, including imperial China and ancient Rome. Heerma van Voss (2001) writes of petitions that “Their ubiquity suggests that petitions are responsive to a need felt by individuals and human societies across cultural boundaries, perhaps something as fundamental as the need for justice” (p. 10). Given that the right to petition is legally guaranteed in the United States, and is a process still often utilized, petitions presumably provide citizens with an opportunity to voice their grievances and to work towards acquiring justice, as Heerma van Voss suggests. While the term can refer to several varieties of request (including petitions for custody in a court of law, or petitions that secure a candidate’s place on an election ballot), this project focuses on collective petitions calling for changes in practice or policy.

As with many other communicative practices that have been widely used throughout history, petitions have been affected by the digital turn—though the first petition-hosting website, The Petition Site, was started in 1999, several other sites have since been developed. Websites like Change.org, We the People, and MoveOn Petitions allow users to compose, post, and circulate their own petitions on the Internet. The growing host of petition sites and the large numbers of citizens using these sites illustrate the popularity of online petitions; for example, We the People alone had more than ten million individual signatures on approximately 300,000 petitions during its first two years of existence, 2011 and 2012 (Mechaber, 2013). MoveOn Petitions’s “About” page of their website boasts that since the site’s launch in the beginning of 2011, “tens of

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1 A discussion of the extensive history of print petitions is beyond the scope of this project, but L. Heerma van Voss’ Petitions in Social History (2001) provides a variety of essays about how petitions have been used across cultures and eras, which has provided me with a greater understanding of how these documents have developed.
thousands of petitions have been started on MoveOn’s petition website, garnering millions of signatures.” These impressive figures and claims suggest that citizens view digital petitions as a plausible method of civic action, and that they are turning to the form with increasing frequency.

During my first year of teaching college composition, I wanted to tap into this opportunity for civic engagement through digital means by asking students in my first-year writing classroom to compose petitions that could be circulated on sites like those mentioned above (and some were, with significant results). I positioned these petitions as shorter versions of their traditional argumentative essays that still needed to incorporate sound research and ethical modes of persuasion. While composing a six-to-eight page research paper requires students to cite multiple sources and to expound on their ideas at length, writing a petition forces students to distill this information into a more concise and direct form. I hoped that this approach would get my students thinking more pointedly about audience, context, and persuasion as they wrote for a public audience located outside of the academic community. Unexpectedly, this assignment has led me down a rabbit-hole of sorts; that is, watching my students compose and circulate their own petitions has raised larger questions in my mind about democracy, the digital realm, and civic engagement, both inside and outside of the first-year writing course.

While many traditional modes of communication have been updated and converted into digital formats, online petitions present a particular case for examining the affordances and constraints of the digital because they have evolved significantly in form, function, and reach as a result of their new digital shape. Being linked explicitly to notions of democracy and civic participation, petitions have a special position on the Internet, an entity sometimes lauded itself as democratic force. Though the exact relationship between democracy and the Internet has been theorized and critiqued from a variety of viewpoints (Ward, 1997; Dean, 2002; Dean, 2003), the proliferation of civically focused websites in recent years suggests an earnest attempt to facilitate democratic participation². Just as the democratic value of the Internet itself has been

² It is not within the parameters of this project to determine whether the Internet is actually a democratic space as a whole; rather, this project focuses on the possibilities for democratic discourse on the Web as it now exists, regardless of its overall nature.

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questioned, digital channels of civic engagement and activism have also been critiqued. Designations of participation in online endeavors such as digital petitions or social media awareness campaigns as “slacktivism” or “armchair activism” seem to be commonplace (Seay, 2014). While these criticisms do bring up valid concerns, such as the potential isolation of individuals from previously cohesive collective social movements and an over-dependence of society on digital technology, the fact remains that many citizens feel comfortable, and even passionate, about engaging with their communities through digital means. Since petitions are traditionally associated with citizen engagement and public opinion, an investigation of online petitions offers a look at how the digital affects both the creation and exchange of democratic public discourse, as well as the beliefs illustrated in such discourse.

Online petitions are undoubtedly a form of activism, as texts that identify a problem in social, political, or economic policy; they are also, more often than not, one of many tools used by social movements, and indicate the presence of other efforts to push the proposed change into reality. And while an online petition is potentially a very powerful document, it does not actually enact the proposed change itself: other steps must be taken to alter circumstances. The fundamental purposes of petitions include calling attention to an issue, rallying community support, identifying an appropriate recipient for the request, and (in many cases) proposing a specific course of action to amend the problem being protested. As a result, viewing online petitions as a form of civic engagement, a concept focused on the identification and discussion of issues of concern, seems particularly apt. Jacoby (2009) defines civic engagement as:

acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good…Through civic engagement, individuals—as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world—are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world. (p. 9)

Advocating for an inclusive approach to civic engagement, Jacoby offers several examples of civic engagement, including learning from other citizens, actively participating in public life, developing a sense of social responsibility, and taking an
active role in political processes. These suggestions fall in line with Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, and Torney-Purta’s (2006) conception of civic and political engagement, which emphasizes “that responsible democratic citizenship be understood as involving more than regular or rote participation in basic electoral or partisan activities…incorporating overlapping sets of skills, motivations, and understandings that are intrinsically valuable and can also support and enhance a variety of political activities across the full range of citizens” (p. 251). At the core of these definitions is the understanding that civic engagement is more than casting a vote—it requires being concerned with how citizens are gaining, sharing, and using information about public issues to encourage social and political reform. While activism refers to a wide array of efforts to change policy, civic engagement entails the identification and discussion of public issues and solutions; thus, this project is more concerned with the concept of civic engagement because of the fundamental function of petitions in calling attention to public issues.

Obviously, online petitions are just one avenue of such efforts to be civically engaged, but their lengthy cultural history and secure position as a form of expression for the civically-involved provide an opportunity to investigate the interplay between democracy and digital civic engagement. This project seeks to explore the following questions in order to gain a more extensive knowledge of how these relatively new texts function, both democratically and rhetorically: What assumptions do online petitions make about democracy? How does technology contribute to the form and function of this digital genre? And finally, what does this mean for the field of rhetoric and composition?

Ultimately, I seek to provide insight on a culturally pervasive, yet grossly under-investigated genre\(^3\) of (now-digital) public writing, in order to better understand how technology can be used to encourage participation in democratic processes, as well as the implications for doing so.

In this first chapter, I suggest that the presence of online petitions illustrates that citizens are not only interested in digital means of civic engagement, but actually place a great deal of confidence in the form to intervene in the democratic process. I highlight some of the many complexities inherent in democratic theory, and identify some markers

\(^3\) “Moreover, the right to petition in America has received little serious attention from academics” (Mark, 1998, p. 2154).
of civic communication styles linked to two different models of democracy: deliberative
democracy and critical-rational debate (Habermas, 1989, and Long, 2008), and
communicative democracy and communicative exchange (Young, 1996). I argue that
communicative democratic exchange, as a more inclusive model of political discussion,
meshes well with the rhetorical public sphere Hauser (2008) advocates—two theoretical
approaches that avoid privileging critical-rational discourse and the force of argument,
thereby potentially increasing levels of inclusion and justice in public affairs. I also
introduce the two petition sites that are of special significance for this project, given their
self-positioning as paths to democratic participation: We the People and MoveOn
Petitions. While print petitions have a long history in an American context, online
petitions are a relatively recent development and are one example of how the Internet can
be used to foster greater democratic engagement.

Chapter Two begins by outlining the classification of online petitions as a genre
through their intended social action (Miller, 1984). However, I argue that classification
based on social action alone does not take into consideration the immense impact that
digital technology has had on the form; more specifically, I claim that the opportunities
provided by digital circulation, a process which builds expansive networks through
“rhetorical velocity” and “amplification” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009), include fostering
publicity and contributing to the formation of publics. The affordances that result, which
include a proliferation in points of access for citizens, may contribute to more inclusive
and just democratic environments. This chapter describes some of the markers of online
petitions as a genre and exposes the importance of taking digital circulation into
consideration when classifying digital genres.

The third chapter examines the interfaces of We the People and MoveOn Petitions
via a visual rhetorical analysis informed by the works of Barthes (1964) and Wysocki
(2002). This analysis focuses on the homepages and creation processes that petitioners
must go through to compose and post their petitions on these sites, organized according
to template, interface, and design aspects. I also discuss the rhetorical moves that these
templates encourage petitioners to utilize in their final documents, illustrating that these
sites seek to encourage particular kinds of petitions with specific rhetorical features. My
findings in this chapter suggest that overall, We the People advocates for petitions more
in line with critical-rational reasoning, while MoveOn Petitions seems to encourage a more open-ended model that allows for communicative modes of exchange like narrative and rhetoric, as identified by Young (1996). This relationship between the visual interfaces petitioners experience and the attitudes towards democracy that each site seems to showcase illustrates that the onset of digital technologies and interconnected media may not only provide citizens with new opportunities for civic communication, but also reinforce already-held attitudes towards the democratic process.

Chapter Four follows with a discourse analysis of a small sample of online petitions from We the People and MoveOn Petitions. This analysis aims to provide textual evidence of my suggestion in the previous chapter that the ways that democracy is represented through the sites and their creation templates may mediate the final petitions; more specifically, I focus on the presence (and absence) of modes of expression that hearken to both critical-rational and communicative forms of exchange in order to suggest by which models of democracy these texts seem to operate. Additionally, I examine how closely these petitions seem to follow the hints and tips provided throughout the creation processes on each site, as another means of examining the impact of templates on these digital texts. My findings reveal that the petitions in this sample utilize a wide range of rhetorical appeals and communicated layered and complex attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement. Further, I find that the sampled petitions do not follow all of the suggestions put forth by the templates, suggesting that perhaps digital templates are not as rigid as initially assumed.

I conclude this project by discussing the implications that this study on online petitions may have on our understandings of democratic participation and civic engagement in the 21st century. This final chapter features a discussion of the complex assumptions about democracy illustrated by the texts in this study, an extended discussion on the affordances and constraints of using this digital genre, and an exploration of the implications of how rhetoric is being taught by online petitions. Ultimately, I claim that though online petitions are just one democratic channel available for citizens to utilize, they represent the idea that expanding technologies can provide citizens with varied and flexible opportunities for civic engagement and democratic exchange that can be applied in a variety of different situations. As malleable texts
directly linked with issues of digital engagement, democracy, and community, scholars in
the field of rhetoric and composition may use these texts as researchers, teachers, and
citizens themselves.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the concept of democracy, 
acknowledging its complex perceptions in both theory and reality. I first address several 
theoretical aspects of democratic government, including ideals commonly associated with 
the form (such as justice and inclusion) and the presence of the public sphere. Then, I 
outline two major models, deliberative democracy and communicative democracy, and 
discuss the communication styles each privileges—critical-rational debate and 
communicative exchange, respectively. Next, I provide some historical background about 
We the People and MoveOn Petitions and explain how each site’s petitioning process 
works, followed by a more extended discussion of the paradox of digital democracy.

Given the modes of discourse that are commonly accepted in each model, I argue that a 
rhetorical model of the public sphere, which accepts the validity of rhetorical as opposed 
to dialectical exchanges in public conversations, is a more inclusive approach to civic 
discourse; additionally, I suggest that Young’s communicative democracy is a helpful 
model for increasing levels and frequency of democratic discourse across different 
groups, given the expansive definition of acceptable public exchange overall. These 
models suggest that a familiarity with different styles of civic exchange can increase our 
knowledge of the ways that online petitions are functioning.

“Democracy”—The God-Term and How We Use It

Democracy as an Ideal

Defining democracy. The desires and opinions of the public are ideally taken 
into account in democracy, a system of government that has a multitude of perceptions 
and definitions. Both Cintron (2010) and Rai (2010) express hesitation at using the term 
“democracy” because it can be used to describe very different modes of governance. For 
instance, consider the following systems that all fall under the umbrella of “democracy”: 
representative democracy, direct democracy, parliamentary democracy, religious 
democracy, participatory democracy, and socialist democracy (to name just a few). The 
multiplicity of terms illustrates that “democracy” can indeed be used to describe varied
systems of government that potentially have different theoretical approaches to rule. Regardless, the term often elicits an image of a government that has come into power after a rejection of an unjust government, as with the American and French Revolutions: The consequences of these revolutions are obviously very much with us and become rearticulated when groups, minorities or majorities, left or right, demand greater justice, civil rights, autonomy, or participation in decision-making. Demands made under these conditions are thought of as innately virtuous or answering a higher purpose. And when the wrong is redressed, the credibility of democracy becomes amplified. (Cintron, 2010, p. 105)

This “demand for greater justice, civil rights, autonomy or participation,” made possible by the allowance of exchange among citizens and with the government, is key in understanding how democracy’s legacy implies inclusion for all citizens. It is a standard belief that all participants in a democracy have the right to voice their wishes, both informally and through formal institutions such as voting, in hopes of influencing policy. Though the ability for groups to challenge a system for certain rights is an undoubtedly positive attribute of democracy, Rai (2010) cautions against conceptualizing democracy uncritically, classifying it as a “god-term” that can obscure actual proceedings (p. 40). Cintron (2010) also cautions that this perception ought not to be taken lightly; that is, he urges us to examine each system as it functions, rather than assuming all democratic governments are innately virtuous. Additionally, as Young (2000) warns, democracy is a matter of degree, not “an all or nothing affair” (p. 5). Since this project deals explicitly with an instrument of democratic discourse, a working definition of “democracy” is necessary; as such, I rely on Young’s “minimalist” description, that “democratic politics entails a rule of law, promotion of civil and political liberties, and free and fair election of lawmakers” (2000, p. 5). Distilling democracy down to this simple formula encapsulates the basic premise of the system—that the government, which is overseen by the people who have certain, unalienable rights, establishes and enforces laws that are meant to be fair and just. Further, citizens are called upon to make their opinions known through a variety of means, including forms like online petitions. While democracy is connected to many different ideals, such as equality, liberty, and
freedom, justice and inclusion are central concerns of Young (1990, 1996, 2000), and contribute greatly to the models of democracy discussed in this project.

**Justice and inclusion.** As Rai (2010) points out, “justice is predicated on the fairness of the ‘democratic’ process, and in other cases, justice is defined as development that represents all interests” (p. 48). Similarly, Young (1990) avoids definitively determining the meaning of the word, writing that she does not put forth a “theory of justice,” as such a theory is intended to stand on its own and to be applied to a variety of cultures that do not necessarily share the same values (p. 3). She does, however, offer a conception to be used in a democratic context, writing about justice as “the institutionalized conditions that make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decision-making, and to express their feelings, experience, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen” (p. 91). For Young, justice means that all individuals and groups in a society not only have access to participation, but also have the capabilities to share their experiences in familiar and comfortable ways that will be taken seriously by others. Young (2000) argues that democratic practice is a means of promoting justice (p. 5), and that institutions that allow all citizens to put forth their opinion are the cornerstone of just societies. As such, institutions ought to promote not only the presence of situations where citizens can interact with the government, but must actively work to produce conditions that encourage citizens to develop and determine their own thoughts, needs, and desires.

And for a decision to be made in a just manner, all interested parties must be included in the decision. “Inclusion” refers to not only the physical presence of individuals and groups affected by a decision, but also to the ability of those groups to participate fully in the conversation at hand. Young (2000) refers to a failure of the former as “external inclusion”, and the latter as “internal exclusion.” External inclusion, the more obvious of the two types, is perpetuated by a number of forces, ranging from institutional carelessness to purposeful blockages of participation. Solutions to these problems, difficult in situations where actors are entrenched in their systems, include limiting the influence of those in power and increasing levels of accountability in democratic processes. However, internal exclusion refers to the failure of a group to listen to all participants, and is more difficult to confront. Young’s claim that “People’s
contributions to a discussion tend to be excluded from serious consideration not because of what is said, but *how it is said*” (emphasis mine, p. 56) hearkens to the realities of social status’s impact on communicative exchanges. Even though individuals are in the arena of discussion for these decisions, their claims are not taken seriously, or are not understood, based on their modes of expression. In order for all voices to be included, modes of communication outside standardized critical-rational debate should be allowed—an argument that will be picked up later in this chapter.

Online petitions, with their increased popularity and range of access points, work towards a more inclusive public arena with extended understandings of appropriate civic exchange, especially due to their increasing popularity. These texts may serve as tools that increase levels of justice since they are recognized forms of discourse that allow citizens to express their ideas and opinions in a public channel. Though users of the sites in this study are encouraged to present their petitions in particular ways (as will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four), the form still allows for a variety of communicative modes.

**Defining the public sphere.** Often associated with discussions of modern democracy, the public sphere refers to an imagined space where private citizens come together to discuss issues of shared concern, often in order to eventually influence government proceedings. Habermas (1989) defines a public sphere as “a society engaged in critical public debate” (p. 52), emphasizing that this activity takes place outside of the government’s realm of influence. While many consider Habermas’ work as the starting point for modern public sphere theory, many theorists have critiqued his original discussion of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, including his focus on “critical-rational discourse” as the primary means by which private citizens communicate with one another publicly. For Habermas, after citizens gather together, they then decide what issues to discuss and deliberate, communicating through “public use of reason” guided by Western logic (p. 28). Habermas cites French salons, British coffee houses, and German table societies as contexts in which critical-rational debate was used as the guiding form of expression, thereby establishing this communicative tradition.

For Habermas, reason is housed in the collective public. Hauser (2008) writes that “Habermas envisions a universalized public sphere populated by disinterested
participants who adhere to rationalistic norms and unitary modes of expression on which they base warranted assent” (p. 55). Describing this focus on rational and unitary expression as unrealistic and limiting in regards to levels of civic participation, Hauser puts forth the idea of a “rhetorical model” of the public sphere, which promotes an understanding of communication as imperfect, fluid, and driven by subjectivities. This model defines the public sphere as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (p. 61). In contrast to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, Hauser theorizes a space that is directly impacted by rhetorical exchanges—a concept which encapsulates a number of different modes of communication. This sentiment, encouraging more open-ended definitions of civic exchange in the public sphere, is echoed in other works (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000; Rice, 2012). This revised model is significant for our perceptions of democratic discourse because many exchanges that take place in the public sphere would actually be considered outside the norms of critical-rational discourse. While critical-rational discourse is undoubtedly still used in public exchanges, a model that allows for and even embraces other modes of communication is potentially more inclusive, providing more citizens with more opportunities to be heard.

These different models of the public sphere emphasize the variety of exchanges that take place within it. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel (2012) write that the public sphere is “shorthand…for a set of social practices that are complex, multifaceted, and dynamic—often chaotic and inelegant” (p. 21). Though these social practices are complex in nature, and are often shifting and changing, this very fact emphasizes the importance of scholarly work and discussion about public writing, even if such work is difficult to take on. Online petitions are being circulated as a part of exchanges occurring in the public sphere, and so the concept is intimately tied to the functions of these texts. By adopting a rhetorical view of the public sphere, more possibilities for civic interaction are available for us to study—particularly in regards to digital documents like online petitions.

**Democracy in Practice**
Though democracy, in theory, necessitates a process that exists for the fair and just treatment of all citizens, this goal is rarely a reality for all citizens. Though equality is often held up as a standard of governance, it seems that not all citizens are treated equally in all arenas; after all, a government must continue to function, even at the cost of individual and group voices. Additionally, material issues, such as economic and social inequality, often limit the opportunities that citizens have to participate in democratic processes—whether as a result of circumstances, or actually coordinated efforts to silence certain groups: “In actually existing democracies there tends to be a reinforcing circle between social and economic inequality and political inequality that enables the powerful to use formally democratic processes to perpetuate injustice or preserve privilege” (Young, 2000, p. 17). For example, powerful and wealthy constituents are often able to use their influence in order to prevent groups that would work against their interests from having any institutional access. Along these same lines, Fraser’s (1990) critique of the public sphere posits that we should work to expose the ways that social inequality affects deliberation and relations between publics (p. 77). While democracy is not without its flaws, its basic premise does necessitate working for the good of all citizens; thus, we ought to keep working so that we can push the reality of the system closer to its ideal form. Critiques that the very essence of democracy is a paradox, due to the need to balance between individual rights and the good of the whole (Cruikshank, 1999), have been made and are noted in this project; however, rather than addressing this issue at length, this project examines a practice that may drive the current imperfect system towards greater levels of inclusion.

Young (2000) encourages us to “deepen democracy” beyond appearances—that is, to combat exclusion and work for greater inclusion through whatever means available. In order to deepen democracy, she writes, it is necessary to understand that the system is multifaceted and that its success depends on the interactions of the public’s members. She writes, “democracy is not only a means through which citizens can promote their interests and hold the power of rulers in check. It is also a means of collective problem-solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of society” (p. 6). Crowley (2010) suggests that “the liberal values of equality and liberty are the most inclusive political values ever
incorporated into a polity, and they have been used repeatedly since the nation’s founding to extend civic and civil rights to previously excluded groups” (p. 6), supporting Young’s supposition that inclusion and justice are central concerns for democracy—in both models discussed below.

Models of Democracy and Democratic Communication Styles

With so many different interpretations of what democratic rule entails, and a variety of nations in which it is applied, there are undoubtedly different models of democratic governance. Though there are many that could be discussed, I selected two models for the purposes of this project, deliberative democracy and communicative democracy, as they are each associated with different styles of political communication. Each model privileges a different approach to democratic exchange, and introduces different standards for acceptable public discourse. Since petitions are documents applicable in both of these theoretical models of democracy, it is important to know what each model advocates as ideal civic exchange in order to better understand how online petitions function—an investigation which will continue in the third and fourth chapters of this project.

Deliberative Democracy

Rather than privileging numbers and systems, as in aggregative democracy, decisions in a deliberative democracy are arrived at “by determining which proposals the collective agrees are supported by the best reasons” (Young, 2000, p. 23). Young defines this process of deliberation in her earlier work (1990) as when “a politicized public resoloves disagreement and makes decisions by listening to one another’s claims and reasons, offering questions and objections, and putting forth new formulations and proposals, until a decision can be reached” (p. 73). Thus, deliberative democracy encourages diverse members of a polity to come together in the public sphere and converse, so that they may decide on a course of action. Situations that encourage deliberation are a result of a society that encourages inclusion, meaning that everyone who would be affected by a decision is present for the decision-making and is included in the process. Inclusion is necessary political equality, so that each voice may be heard and will contribute to the positive outcome of a discussion. As Dahlberg (2001) points out:
“Respectful and reflexive deliberation is demanded in order for self-seeking individuals to be transformed into publicly-oriented citizens and public opinion to develop that can feed into formal decision-making processes” (p. 620). Deliberation, due to its occurrence after citizens come together in the interest of a public issue, is meant to enable an outcome agreeable to all involved.

Yet for its focus on inclusion, deliberative democracy emphasizes that the best argument for the good of the whole (that convinces the most people) is the ultimate goal of discourse, which means that there are potentially members of the public who may be affected negatively by the outcome that has been deemed best for the majority. Young (2000) writes: “Some formulations of the model should be criticized…and the model also needs refinements in several respects in order to serve a theory of inclusive democratic process” (p. 26). It is important to note Young’s careful categorization of “some” formulations, provided that the same issues do not plague all deliberative models; but, in instances that do fail to include all citizens, Young cites the privileging of argument, the idea of unity as a starting point, the supposition of face-to-face-discussion, and the assumption of an established norm of order as byproducts of deliberative democracy that trouble the form’s efficacy (pp. 37-47). Focusing on argument as the means for deliberation presupposes a shared framework and similar approaches to discussion, which potentially excludes citizens familiar with different communicative traditions. Welsh (2002) writes that though deliberative democracy is seen as collective decision making through dialogue, the popular conception of dialogue is too limiting. He argues that there are no tools provided for participants to actually enact change, as deliberative democrats “insist that strategic means, understood as irony, metaphor, and narrative, should be employed sparingly and only in order to restore ‘conditions of direct communication’ necessary to the pursuit of ‘mutual understanding’ in dialogue” (p. 682). Not all modes of communication are seen as valid, a fact which hampers potential participation.

Instead, particular modes of expression are emphasized and encouraged in this mode of democracy. Since deliberation among citizens is key in Habermas’ (1989) conception of what occurs in the public sphere, critical-rational discourse is one kind of exchange often used in a deliberative democratic context. As Barton (2005) points out, critical-rational debate entails three main conditions: that all participants are equal in
standing, that discussions occurring must concern issues that are not yet settled, and that anyone who possesses a desire to participate may do so. Of course, these standards are difficult to guarantee in reality, but this approach does encourage certain modes of discourse and behaviors meant to establish these guidelines. For instance, to work towards the equality of all members involved in the conversation, participants are expected to bracket their differences, meaning that they are expected to put aside their own experiences and subjectivities so that they may reason logically.

Long (2008), whose work ultimately critiques the practice of critical-rational debate due to its exclusionary nature, offers three markers of critical-rational debate: a privileging of general truth over specific experience, authoritative facts over personal feelings, and reasoned positions over narrative. These three modes of discourse are meant to encourage higher levels of inclusion in discussion, since they are theoretically available to everyone, regardless of background or status. But, as the other model in this study implies, this understanding of political discourse is potentially problematic, as these modes of discourse are exclusionary of identity and background—concepts that profoundly affect opinions and attitudes towards public policy.

**Communicative Democracy**

It seems that Young’s (2000) main issue with some modes of deliberative democracy is that it privileges the force of argument, which focuses on “educated” communication, which is dispassionate and disinterested (p. 39). This lack of attachment, traced back to Habermas’ (1989) notion of critical-rational debate, can hamper efforts to foster inclusion because logical modes of discussion are a marker of those who have had the luxury to cultivate such a practice due to their social and financial status. Additionally, communication based on reason necessitates the bracketing of difference and emotion, though feelings have “become a measurement of our publicness…a primary means of orienting oneself to the world” (Rice, 2012, p. 59). If feelings and emotions are, as Rice argues, the connections between an individual and an issue, taking those out of the communication process may negate the process as a whole. Many scholars of democratic theory have mentioned modes of discourse outside of critical debate: Rice (2012) cites feelings as integral to our interest in a public issue; Welsh (2002) cites irony, metaphor, and narrative as ways to engage in conversation; and Hauser (2008) cites
rhetoric and informal exchanges, such as narrative, as ways to connect with other members of a public.

These modes of expression are all methods of connecting with other individuals or groups through personal experience—often, those who do not share cultural, historical, socioeconomic, political, or personal backgrounds, and are oftentimes very different from one another. While the practice of “bracketing”, or setting aside differences when engaging in public debate, is advocated as a means of finding a common course of action in deliberation, many argue that the practice is not actually effective (Fraser, 1990; Young, 1996). For example, even if people of varying economic status can meet and discuss issues of shared concern, “social power…can prevent people form being equal speakers” due to the confidence, dialects, and manners of speaking that may be a result of socioeconomic background or other factors (Young, 1996, p. 122). Though deliberation is meant to enact a process of transformation for all participants, Young argues that this transformation is not possible when members of the polity are excluded, or when they are not able to share their own positions. Thus, Young advocates for a model of democracy that acknowledges and even highlights difference so that people of differing backgrounds may find shared understandings through authentic exchange. She calls this revised model of deliberative democracy “communicative democracy,” where participants still engage in public discussion, but with more expansive definitions for appropriate discourse and the following three requirements: its members must respect one another, they must accept everyone’s right to express their opinions, and they must listen to the others (p. 126). This model is meant to increase levels of inclusion and work towards a common good through its allowance of communication modes other than critical-rational debate, as well as the assumption that all participants are willing to engage in such an exchange.

Communicative democracy, as Young explains, expands the parameters of democratic communication to include greeting, rhetoric and storytelling as ways of coping with inherent differences. These modes of communication acknowledge difference and demonstrate situated knowledge, which encourages people to try and see outside of their own positionalities. She writes that the current system of interest-based democracy dictates that people need not leave their own comfort zones because they are making decisions based on their own wishes and attempting to further those desires
through argumentation. When what counts as accepted public discourse is expanded, we can then listen more completely and extensively to others because we can begin to understand their positions contextually. “Where such a public contains group-based, cultural, social perspectival, and valuative differences, moreover, these communicative forms supplement argument by providing ways of speaking across difference in the absence of significant shared understandings” (Young, 1996, p. 129). The alternative modes of communication that Young suggest are meant to decrease internal exclusion, as they function to …“[increase] the chances that those who make proposals will transform their positions from an initial self-regarding stance to a more objective appeal to justice, because they must listen to others with differing positions to whom they are also answerable” (p. 53). By allowing and encouraging modes of communication other than critical-rational debate, this approach inspires participants in the discussion to try and connect with one another through more personal forms of address.

By advocating authentic social connections, Young hopes that citizens will understand the social, political, economic, and personal orientations of others that are likely different from their own. This understanding should ideally breed a desire to find a solution to the problem that really does work for everyone. In addition to situating participants in their environments, rhetorical exchanges instill trust between members of communities working toward a common goal (Hauser & Benoit-Barne, 2002). It is important to understand, though, that the use of these modes is meant to critique the dominant modes of political exchange that are exclusionary, not to replace them completely or fully overhaul the procedure of deliberation.

**Democratic Communication**

Obviously, critical-rational and communicative exchanges feature very different modes of discourse. They originate from different models of democracy, and can even be linked to a fundamental dichotomy between passion and reason that seems to exist in the modern world. Crowley (2010) writes that “Liberal thinkers tried to eliminate the impact of passion and interest in public debate by rendering empirically based reasoning as the only legitimate means of assembling evidence and drawing conclusions” (p. 37). This erasure of emotion is meant to be “liberatory,” as it “is supposed to be the best method for identifying the common good, abstracted from…what any individual feels to be most
desirable” and “is supposed to permit rational critical self-reflection” (Roberts, 1996, p. 54). As such, modes of discourse that are widely accepted as reasonable, such as referencing societally agreed-upon truths, using “authoritative facts over emotion” (Long, 2008, p. 210), and utilizing forthright statements of position, are markers of critical-rational debate (categories borrowed from Long’s work). Though these modes of communication seem to be accessible to a wide variety of people, this privileging of Western logic is exclusionary, as these modes of exchange are associated with wealth, education, and privilege.

The elimination of emotion and subsequent inequality has resulted in the negation of personal investment in democratic discourse—a condition that Young’s (1996, 2000) model seeks to remedy. By encouraging citizens to use greeting, rhetoric, and narrative, this model increases the potential forms that civic discourse can take, increasing opportunities for involvement in public discussions. “Greeting” refers to a moment in the text that does not necessarily hold great meaning for the communicative exchange, but instead indicate the beginning or end of a conversation, as well as “forms of speech that often lubricate ongoing discussion with mild forms of flattery, stroking of egos, and deference” (p. 129). Young’s definition of “rhetoric” is slightly less defined than Aristotle’s tropes of ethos, pathos, and logos, instead relying on situatedness of a phrase, or the construction of the occasion, speaker, and audience. “Humor, wordplay, images, and figures of speech embody and color the arguments, making the discussion pull on thought through desire” (pp. 130-31). Finally, “storytelling” refers to the act of sharing narratives of personal involvement with an issue. This model actively encourages citizens to embrace their own subjectivities, the exact opposite of the bracketing that critical-rational discourse encourages. Ryder (2011) argues that reflection “sometimes requires people to highlight their sense of their own identity and the commonalities of experiences that they share with others in that group, including an understanding of how they are seen by other groups and an analysis of power dynamics that shape these experiences” (p. 139), which can contribute to a more complex and empathic understanding of social relations. Instead of negating personal feelings and emotions, this model emphasizes the necessity of understanding personal subjectivity and identity to ensure that justice is served. This bent works well with an understanding of the public sphere as rhetorical, as
suggested by Hauser (2008). Petitions may show modes of communication that are both critical-rational and more rhetorical in nature, thus they can serve as examples of texts which function using multiple forms of address in modern democracy.

The modes of discourse outlined above for both critical-rational and communicative exchange will be re-visited in both Chapter Three and Chapter Four’s analyses of the petition sites and petitions themselves. Regardless of the modes of political discourse illustrated by the texts, online petitions are important due to the fact that, “…democratic participation carries enormous transformative power, by providing participants who want to get past shouting at one another with opportunities to think about a problem from a stance other than as a private individual motivated by self-interest, to think about it as a citizen motivated by concern for the community” (Hauser & Benoit-Barne, 2002, p. 264). These texts represent the potential to bring groups of people together to voice their concerns and potentially enact change, and We the People and MoveOn Petitions are both organizations that provide citizens with the opportunity to create, post, and circulate petitions.

**Backgrounds and Processes of We the People & MoveOn Petitions**

While other petition sites, like Change.org, are also available for use in a wide variety of social contexts, We the People and MoveOn Petitions are marketed directly as ways to engage in the democratic process. Each site’s slogan emphasizes this idea: We the People’s catchphrase is, “Your voice in our government,” while MoveOn Petitions describes itself as “Democracy in action.” Though each site positions itself as part of democratic exchange, they each have unique backgrounds and processes.

**We the People**

We the People, located at https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/, is a website hosted by the White House that individuals can visit in order to browse, sign and create online petitions that will be forwarded on to policy experts if they gain enough signatures. The policy expert will then post a written response, referencing their current or future efforts to a change the laws or circumstances addressed by the petition.4

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4 One such example is a response titled “Increasing Public Access to the Results of Scientific Research,” in which a White House cabinet member reveals that after receiving
The original threshold for a petition to receive an official response at the time of the site’s launch in September 2011 was set at 5,000 signatures. However, with the increased activity on the site, the limit has been raised several times, and currently sits at 100,000 signatures that must be acquired within 30 days. Additionally, in order to be searchable on the platform, a petition must “cross the first threshold” by reaching 150 signatures ("Terms of Participation"). If a petition gains enough signatures in the allotted time, an official response to the public will be drafted by a designated policy official (presumably one most suited to answer on the issue) and posted on the site, linking the petition to the response. Additionally, other petitions that are related to the one that has been answered will also be linked to this response, even if they have not reached the signature quota. As of June 2014, there have been 148 official responses on topics ranging from the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana to the proposed construction of a Death Star defense system. Ideally, this process would spur tangible policy changes, but We the People’s model only guarantees the acknowledgement of grievances. It is important to note that when a petition reaches its threshold for signatures, it does not require the government to enact any changes, just to post a response.

We the People, as an initiative of the executive branch, frames itself as a legitimate, sanctioned way to express one’s First Amendment rights. Under the “How & Why” tab of the website, the site explains that “We the People provides a new way to petition the Obama Administration to take action on a range of important issues facing our country. We created We the People because we want to hear from you.” By featuring a clear explanation of how the process works, and proclaiming on the homepage that the site is “Giving all Americans a way to engage their government on the issues that matter to them,” We the People encourages an image of inclusiveness by focusing on the

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the petition, he drafted a memorandum to federal agencies, directing those with more than $100 million research budgets to develop plans to make federally-funded research available to the public within 12 months of completed projects.

5 This barrier to public access for these petitions does raise some concerns about the circulation processes for these texts, discussed in the next chapter of this project.

6 There are a number of petitions posted online that seem facetious in nature. However, Dietel-McLaughlin (2009) would suggest that we examine these “irreverent compositions” as more than jokes, as sometimes, they aim to critique public processes or events in unexpected ways.
forum’s capacity to allow all citizens a say in public affairs. It also emphasizes the idea that the service itself is innovative, though the act of petitioning is not: “The idea of petitioning the White House or the government isn’t new, but this online platform is. Since the White House has never featured anything like this…” Such a statement implies that the executive branch is both innovative and willing to listen to citizens. The site itself seems to emphasize three main aspects of the process: the site as a direct line to the government, the innovation illustrated by the launch of the site, and the desire of the government to hear from citizens directly, in addition to through representatives.

The responses to the petitions are perhaps the most unique aspect of this site, and are featured on the homepage, which has four visible links to the most recent responses. Each response has its own webpage, with headline-style title and descriptions of authors, who are federal employees of varying levels and ranks. The page also features links to the petitions the response addresses, as well as buttons that allow users to share the response via Facebook and Twitter. These responses contain a large amount of information, and serve as texts that illustrate the government is interested in these issues and will address them (at some level). The institutional response, which is the assumed goal of petitions on this site, is a unique aspect of We the People. The site’s model suggests an approach to civic engagement that is directly related to political processes of the government, reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the executive branch and illustrating that one use of a petition is to appeal to the highest office in the United States.

**MoveOn Petitions**

While a branch of the United States government does not officially host MoveOn Petitions, MoveOn, a well-known group that came into existence in 1998, backs it. Interestingly enough, MoveOn began as an e-mail group that distributed a petition asking Congress to “censure President Clinton and move on” (“What is MoveOn?”). The organization, which describes itself as progressive, has a long history of attempting to encourage civic engagement through digital means, including efforts like the launch of ActionForum.com, which allowed users to discuss public policy in forum posts that were “structured to promote a productive dialogue by the rise of ideas with broad support” through steps to “support threads of comments and replies to comments ordered by the preference of the participants rather than chronologically” (ActionForum.com). While the
organization launched its first online petition site, called signon.org, in 2011, its current petition-hosting site, launched in March of 2013 is located at http://petitions.moveon.org/ (Weiner, 2013). Once a petition reaches 15 signatures, the website’s staff sends it to a small group of MoveOn members affected by the issue. If the petition “does well with that test segment and it’s clear it’s something the MoveOn community cares about, then [they’ll] share it with an even bigger segment of members, etc., and it keeps building like that” (MoveOn Corps, personal communication, June 9, 2014). One example is the petition posted by one UPS employee protesting the unfair termination of another employee, which was signed by many other UPS workers and so was forwarded onto a small group of MoveOn members in New York City. This group supported the cause, which resulted in MoveOn volunteers making phone calls to UPS offices, union organizations, and city officials, as well as continuing the circulation of the petition among the public, resulting in more than 48,000 signatures (Kalfus, 2014). While We the People is set up to service petitioners with the preliminary desired outcome of an institutional response (and ideally procedural change), MoveOn Petitions provides a more open-ended scenario than We the People. This suggests that MoveOn Petitions operates under an understanding of democracy that encourages utilizing different channels of influence; that is, by leaving the course of action open-ended, goals may materialize through different avenues of intervention.

The “About” page for MoveOn Petitions features a title that proclaims the site’s effort in “Re-Inventing People-Powered Politics.” While We the People’s page features a more traditional format and layout for an “About” section, complete with a “Frequently Asked Questions” tab, MoveOn Petitions’s reads more as a manifesto, consisting of six paragraphs that each start with “We” and a strong verb—for example: “We empower,” “We believe,” and “We connect” are several of the phrases used on this page. Most prevalent on this page is the idea that the site works to “empower regular folks...to become effective advocates for their causes.” Interestingly, this page doesn’t contain an explicit discussion of how the site works in regards to numbers and passing on to larger groups of MoveOn members, but instead explains the process as a “system of real-time electronic petition delivery to ensure that people's voices get through in the corridors of power, and that elected officials can respond directly to their constituents via our email
system.” A personal communication with Alan, a MoveOn Corps volunteer, stated that numbers in the smaller groups of MoveOn members vary, depending on location, availability and topic (June 9, 2014). In fact, MoveOn Petitions packages itself as an entity that merely mediates between citizens and the government, rather than overtly emphasizing any sort of political connections or institutional draw—which, as a political action committee, the group surely possesses. For instance, the group describes itself as a “progressive” entity that backs candidates they identify as having similar values to their organization (“What is MoveOn?”). Several organizing members of the group (both past and present) have been associated with liberal politicians, including Senator Harry Reid and President Barack Obama (Terkel & Grim, 2013).

While We the People provides links to responses on its site, the responses are not placed in any real prominence on the homepage; MoveOn Petitions, however, emphasizes petitions that have reached thresholds and have resulted in the proposed change. Visible on the homepage of the petition site are links to “Recent Victories,” each accompanied with a picture that draws the user’s attention. Each “Victory” has its own page, with the story of the original petition and the actions that resulted from its plea, written up in a press release format. This focus on the linkages between the original petition and the policy or social changes that result from the circulation of the text communicates that MoveOn Petitions’ efforts get tangible, real-world results.

We the People and MoveOn Petitions both focus on their potential to engage important issues brought up by interested citizens, but they position themselves in very different ways: We the People as an outlet to speak directly with the government, and MoveOn Petitions as a force that may enact change in a variety of ways. However, both sites communicate a desire to hear from as many voices as possible and a focus on facilitating democratic exchanges between and among the government and its citizens.

**Digital Democracy—A Paradox?**

While the Internet has been lauded by some as a harbinger of true democracy because of its capabilities for communication across physical barriers and for creating civic spaces online, there are many problems with this claim, most notably that the Internet is owned and controlled by private carriers, and that access to this technology is
still not available for all groups due to a variety of factors. Benkler (2006) notes five critiques of the stance that the Internet is overwhelmingly democratic: first, the Internet provides an overload of information that splinters the political community; second, certain sites dominate web traffic because they have more financial resources; third, the ability for anyone to post without credibility negates the function of the media as a watchdog; fourth, the fact that in authoritarian states, information can still be controlled using the Internet; and finally, that the digital divide between those who have access to technology and those who do not is still in existence. These are all valid critiques—and there are many more that exist⁷. However, this project does not attempt to reconcile the absolute practice of democracy and the Internet, and operates under the “deliberative” camp of Internet democracy that Dahlberg (2001) describes as the notion that the Internet is a means for expansion of communication that takes place in the public sphere (p. 616).

As such, I examine what styles of democratic communication online petitions from We the People and MoveOn Petitions utilize, and through this, I attempt to ascertain what assumptions petitions from these sites are making about the democratic process.

Feenberg (2012) argues that the aspects of the Internet that allow citizens to form groups and voices contribute to the formation of deliberative, egalitarian realms: “Any technology that offers new possibilities for the formation of community is thus democratically significant” (p. 12). The impetus for this project rests on this notion—even a small step is a step. Perhaps, as Feenberg suggests, the status of the current system of the Internet, which does privilege certain groups, should serve as our motivation to create a technological and social system that is more democratic. Presumably, with the development of technologies and websites and the increasing rate of which people use the Internet as a way to get involved with public movements, there is evidence of such a push. I maintain that the presence (and institutional acceptance) of online petitions represents this shift. And while there has been much conjecture about the impact that the Internet and its accompanying technologies will have on democratic processes, there is still not an absolute answer on how the Internet has affected public, and democratic,

⁷ Such as, “rather than acting as a revolutionary tool rearranging political power and instigating direct democracy, the Internet is destined to become dominated by the same actors in American politics who currently utilize other mediums” (Warnick, 2002, p. 91).
discourse. Though the ever-expanding span of the Internet suggests that there will never be a definitive answer, online petitions offer an opportunity to examine public discourse in light of the influence of digital technology.

This chapter has provided a discussion of connections between democratic government and online petitions, and has aimed to justify for the use of important terms and definitions that will surface throughout the project. Via outlining the models of deliberative and communicative democracy, and the communication styles that each privileges, I have emphasized the fact that communicative democracy is a revision of deliberative democracy; the two forms necessitate deliberation among citizens, but communicative democracy critiques the exclusionary implications of discussion via critical-rational deliberation. This project is a means to examine what modes of exchange from each theoretical model are being used in online petitions, and through such an examination, I hope to discern what sorts of assumptions are being made about democracy by these texts. Additionally, by extending the definitions of appropriate discourse in the public sphere to include modes of communication other than critical-rational debate, we can potentially provide a more inclusive, and therefore more just, environment for citizens. This is key for an analysis of online petitions, which often utilize more informal methods of persuasion, many times rhetorical in nature, and are still considered legitimate texts in the public arena. Finally, I addressed the need for research to be done on democratic discourse that utilizes the Internet, justifying the trajectory of this project.

Interestingly enough, the history of written petitions in the United States is quite colorful on its own, precluding the presence of the digital aspect facing us now. Mark (1998) writes that petitioning, as it was understood at the time of the Bill of Rights, has changed dramatically throughout the last several centuries, but has obviously not disappeared completely. He argues that the form evolved, and:

They came to be instead a tool of democratic mass politics, useful in creating political dramas and highlighting legislative deadlocks, to the detriment of popularly-initiated deliberation on grievances. At the same time, petition proved to be a political training ground for the disenfranchised, who learned how to play
a role in the new world of mass electoral politics without the ballot and who sought through that knowledge to gain the ballot. (pp. 2160-2161)

As Mark points out, petitions have been used throughout history by a variety of groups, some of which were not even institutionally acknowledged. Thus, examining this clearly accessible form of civic action during a period where its form is changing yet again has the potential to reveal a great deal about democratic exchange, and how it occurs on the Internet.

Chapter Two will discuss the process of digital circulation and its effect on online petitions, including how the process shapes both the genre itself and the sorts of democratic exchanges that results from these texts. Circulation, as a necessary means of gaining support for these causes, has several outcomes for democracy in general, including the formation of publics and increase in channels for democratic exchange, which will be examined in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO: DIGITAL CIRCULATION, GENRE CLASSIFICATION, AND DEMOCRACY

In Chapter One, after discussing the complications associated with democratic theory, I introduced two different models of democracy, deliberative and communicative, and outlined the communication styles commonly associated with each. I also reviewed the petitioning processes of the two sites focused on in this project, We the People and MoveOn Petitions. In this chapter, I claim that though the process of circulation has always been a concern for petitions, digital technology has created new opportunities for online petitions and their role in democratic exchange. Using the Internet to distribute and circulate petitions provides many affordances for petitioners, such as the ability to share petitions with more ease than ever before, and in shorter periods of time. I argue that these new opportunities for online petitions encourage wider audiences and provide previously unavailable avenues of influence, making them an instrument for potentially increased levels of inclusion and justice.

I initially approach the genre of online petitions from a social-action standpoint (Miller, 1984) because it offers a more helpful lens for identification than the presence of structural features alone—especially in light of the purpose and history of petitions. As texts that are composed and circulated to enact some sort of social action, petitions are public texts that are defined in our minds by their function and purpose—gathering as much community support as possible through circulation in order to foster awareness and encourage social change. Though online petitions share some traits with their print predecessors, including the fundamental purpose of calling attention to public issues, I ultimately claim in this chapter that online petitions are very much their own genre because petitions that are distributed and circulated via digital means may be exposed to more avenues of influence than ever before; that is, petitions found on the Internet are available through more channels than print petitions, which increases their possible paths of distribution and circulation. Such a realization necessitates the consideration of a text’s “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009), or potential for being shared across time, space, form, and even purpose. I then identify two main affordances of online petitions resulting from digital circulation: the elimination of typical physical constraints facing
print petitions, and the presence of multiple access points for these petitions. Finally, I examine the connections between digital circulation and two aspects of democratic theory—publicity and public formation—in order to relate the classification of the genre back to my central concern with how online petitions work within democratic societies. As its own, unique genre, online petitions represent one intersection of democracy and technology that can be used to encourage social change. The process of digital circulation, and the varied opportunities it offers, makes online petitions more malleable than their print counterparts, in regards to the means through which they achieve their ultimate goal.

By discussing the importance of circulation for online petitions, I aim to illustrate the unique qualities that have come about during their time as digital texts, and engage in the study of public genres that Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) claim “would enable rhetoricians to examine sites of intervention, analyzing how such genres enable participation in public processes…” (p. 159). Increased opportunities via digital circulation, such as the ability to connect users through social media sites, represent the impact that the process may have on democratic exchange and serve as potential “sites of intervention” that Bawarshi and Reiff urge us to examine.

Genre Theory
Complexities of Classifying Digital Genres

Though print petitions have an extensive history, websites devoted specifically to posting and circulating petitions only just started appearing at the turn of the 21st century (the first hosting site, The Petition Site, was launched in 1999). Given the difficulties in identifying digital genres due to their recent development and their proclivity to change along with developing technology, Miller and Shepherd (2004) suggest looking at what Jamieson (1973) termed “ancestral genres” in order to trace their existence and to understand how the current cultural moment has ushered these texts in to their current form (p. 1451). Ancestral genres are forms of discourse that contemporary genres appear to have developed from; for example, hand-written letters are an ancestral genre of e-mail, and have instilled certain features in the genre such as a greeting and a signature. Surprisingly little analysis has been done on the markers of collective print or digital
petitions, but both forms seem to possess three characteristics: an address to the person or
group being petitioned, a request and a documented motivation for the request, and an
accompanying list of signatures denoting support for the cause (Heerma van Voss, 2001,
p. 6). Additionally, in the United States, collective petitions have been used in both
formal situations (for example, as a legal document to get a candidate or issue on a ballot)
and informal situations (in some cases, as a way to illustrate community support or
outrage about a particular topic); however, Alfonso, Marco, and Madrid (2008) write that
“although existing genres are a reference frame to explain the emergence of new genres,
such new genres can only be accounted for as the result of a transformation process,
enabled by the affordances of the new media.” While understanding a form of discourse
through its generic predecessors is important, it is more in the interest of this project to
pursue an in-depth examination of the digital format, keeping in mind the conditions that
have facilitated this current form. Despite the fact that print petitions and digital petitions
share a name and a common purpose, I argue that they are certainly each their own forms
due to the affordances that digital technology offers online petitions.

Though textual markers of digital petitions (such as the three main parts
introduced above) are important for understanding a genre, a text’s genre is actually best
understood as result of its social purpose, due to the fact that texts exist in order to
accomplish a particular action. Further, we identify and choose to compose different
types of texts largely because of the potential communicative opportunities they offer.
While its formal features may signify what category or genre a text belongs to, our
understanding of a genre is linked to the genre’s purpose and the other forms with which
it is associated—an understanding that seems to hold true with digital genres.

Genre as Social Action

As stated above, genres can be defined through a number of means—scholars
from a variety of fields have theorized more structurally focused systems based on
linguistic and textual characteristics, but an approach focused on social context seems
more appropriate when discussing public writing. Yates and Orlikowski (1992) define the

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8 While an in-depth investigation of print petitions is out of the scope for this project, see
Mark (1998), Blaine (2001), and Ota (2001) for a discussion of their history and
evolution throughout several periods of American history.
term as “a distinctive type of communicative action, characterized by a socially
recognized communicative purpose, and common aspects of form” (p. 543). Focusing
mainly on action, Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) write that “…genres are understood as
forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and
typically act within various situations” (p. 4). Thus, it seems that an understanding of
genre implies a familiarity with common textual markers, but more importantly,
necessitates recognition of the text’s communicative purpose. Miller (1984) phrases this
relationship succinctly, writing that genre is “a classification based in rhetorical practice
and consequently open rather than closed and organized around situated actions” (p. 155).
Even though we might recognize a genre through its structural form, that form is
determined by the rhetorical purpose of the genre; this relationship implies that the
intended social action, or purpose, of the text is the most important classifying factor for
genre. Such an approach demands a focus on two main ideas: the purpose for the text,
along with the kairotic moment to which it is meant to respond. For Miller, genre
represents an intended action, and if this is so, then “situation and motive” must be a part
of that equation (p. 152). By understanding the discourse that emerges from a particular
moment in a particular setting, Miller claims that we can deepen our understanding of
genre and subsequently, our perception of social action, through texts by considering the
cultural moments that spawn such responses.

It is important to note that this focus on the impetus behind a discursive act does
not completely negate its textual features. Since the physical characteristics of an text are
the direct result of its intended purpose, examining those features in conjunction with the
perceived goal of the text provides the most comprehensive understanding of the genre as
a whole. Miller writes: “It is through this hierarchical combination of form and substance
that symbolic structures take on pragmatic force and become interpretable actions; when
fused, the substantive and formal components can acquire meaning in context” (p. 160).
Additionally, over time, we become familiar with the textual markers of genres, and so
we begin to link textual features with the genre (for example, with a petition, the list of
signatures attached at the end implies that it is a collective petition). Miller and Shepherd
(2004) write that when some sort of communicative action acquires a common name, it is
most likely functioning as a genre. Though it may be easy to define a blog by its features,
as in their example, “when bloggers discuss the purpose of the blog, its function and value as social action involving rhetors and audiences…the nature of the generic blog becomes problematic” because people use blogs for different ends⁹ (p. 1458). However, they write that bloggers seem to have two main ends in using blogs: self-expression and community development (p. 1461). Thus, the classification of the generic exigence of the blog as, “some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self” (p. 1465) highlights the intended action and cultural moment of the blogs.

Similar to the blog, online petitions are created to enact particular ends, and are both popular and possible because of our current technological amenities. And like blogs, a form that shares the purpose of self-expression with its ancestral genre of a print diary, online petitions emerged from a print form but have taken on an expanded role as a digital text.

**The Social Action of Online Petitions**

In order for a petition to have enough force to initiate its suggested change, it has to acquire the support of other community members, represented by the presence of signatures attached to the document. The number of signatures serves as a message to the person or entity being petitioned—a message that there is a large number of people concerned with this issue. A petition is meant to be a participatory text, as it requires committed audience members to sign their names to the cause, and in turn, to share the text to accumulate more signatures. Thus audience members, in many cases, are meant to be more than just readers—they become, in a way, secondary authors to the text, invested in the fate of the petition through their explicit support and (often) their efforts to spread the message of the petition.

Operating by the principles outlined in the previous paragraph, it appears that print and digital petitions would be part of the same genre; however, I maintain that though the core purpose of a petition, regardless of its print or digital quality, is to call attention to a problem and to enact some sort of social change, digital petitions are subject to being circulated in new ways. When a petition is posted on the Internet, it is accessible through more avenues than a print petition ever would be, and therefore, is

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⁹ They suggest potentially creating sub-genres, based on particular populations and how they use blogs (p. 1458).
subject to more paths of distribution and circulation. This variety in channels of influence allows digital petitions to be used in more varied ways (and potentially, for different ends) than their print counterparts, suggesting that they belong to a genre all their own. Bazerman (1994) claims that genres “rely on our being able to recognize them and to some degree understand the meanings they instantiate within the systems of which they are a part” (p. 81). Online petitions are distinct from print petitions because they operate within a different system and may lend themselves to different paths of influence than their print predecessors. As a field, we must consider the influence of digital distribution and circulation on the ways that digital texts function, which means that our strategies of genre classification must be pushed beyond considering genre as social action.

Online petitions achieve their power through the process of digital circulation—or, the distribution and re-distribution of the text to audience members through a variety of websites. In addition to fostering support for the main cause, online petitions are used to instill in the audience an awareness of and (ideally) a commitment to the movement. While the end goals are the same for both print and digital petitions, the means for such outcomes are different, as online petitions can be distributed in previously impossible ways. For example, online petitions are hosted on particular sites, and they are accessible and searchable via those sites; however, they can also be shared through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter and through more traditional websites and blogs. And after the initial distribution of the online petition from the original creator, it is available for other users to share through whatever sites or social media they wish, and for whatever purpose they wish (to critique, or to support). Additionally, this process takes place with greater speed, range, and ease, than ever before, creating multiple avenues of influence that can attract the attention of potential signees, as well as traditional and non-traditional media outlets. As online petitions are subject to different forces and processes than their print predecessors, they represent their own genre.

Bawarshi and Rieff (2010) claim that, “Within any socio-historically bounded structure or system of activity there exist competing demands and goals, contradictions, tensions and power relations that shape which ideologies and actions are reproduced” (p. 81)—a claim that seems particularly apt when discussing collaborative texts such as petitions. As time continues, forms of communication change also, and are subject to
these tensions—as we can see with petitions, which have evolved alongside technological advances. In order to achieve its stated goal, a petition must go through the process of circulation, which is perhaps the most important of the form’s actions since it is the means through which other results emerge. Digital circulation creates more opportunities for intervention and action than possible in previous times.

**Digital Circulation**

**Delivery, Distribution, and Circulation**

Recent historiographical work done in rhetoric and composition has suggested that the fifth canon of classical rhetoric, delivery, has been largely overlooked in modern academic studies (Welch, 1999; Trimbur, 2000; Porter, 2009). However, a focus on digital technologies has brought delivery back into prevalence in rhetorical theory. Trimbur (2000) argues that “with the democratic revolutions of the modern age, delivery must be seen as inseparable from the circulation of writing and the widening diffusion of socially useful knowledge” (p. 191). Thus, delivery is especially important in light of the affordances that the digital provides rhetors—in terms of speed, range, and possibility.

The canon of delivery encapsulates both distribution and circulation—two connected, but separate, terms. Digital distribution “refers to rhetorical decisions about the mode of presenting discourse in online situations,” whereas circulation “is a related term that pertains to how that message might be recycled in digital space” with or without the original author’s express permission, or even knowledge (Porter, 2009, p. 214). So, with online petitions, distribution activities would involve the original author posting the petition to particular sites or sending it via e-mail to chosen peers, while circulation would entail anything that occurs after the text leaves the control of the original author—the sharing of the petition via social media or other means by other supporters (or, in some cases, opponents of the petition). As Porter emphasizes, “Circulation refers to the potential for that message to have a document life of its own and be re-distributed without your direct intervention” (p. 214). Similarly, Gries (2013) emphasizes the fact that the process of circulation cannot be largely influenced by the original rhetor once she sends the text out into the ether: “Circulation, to be clear, is largely beyond a designer’s control, unlike distribution, which is a deliberate process” (p. 344). While circulation is a
process that most digital texts take part in, online petitions\textsuperscript{10} are unique in the digital realm because their effectiveness literally depends on their ability to gain signatures.

There are a number of metaphors that have been put forth to help us better understand circulation. In her discussion of rhetorical actancy and circulation, Gries (2012) uses the metaphor of tumbleweed to illustrate how circulation works. Though tumbleweed is just a mess of dried out roots and plant matter, the tumbleweed finds its meaning, and its purpose, as it moves around from place to place. “Tumbleweeds acquire new meaning, in other words, as they acquire responsibility during circulation” (p. 78). I think we could substitute “digital petitions” for “tumbleweeds” and have an equally potent image placed in our minds, given the increased value that petitions experience as they accumulate signatures—both in clout and publicity.

Going in a slightly different direction, Seas (2012) writes about the connections between epidemiology and circulation. When we discuss digital texts, we often refer to their increased circulation and viewing as a result of the text “going viral\textsuperscript{11}.” She argues that while it seems to have been the norm in our field to view rhetoric as a cause and effect relationship, ecologies provide us a more complex, and messier, way to view these interactions; further, she extends this viral metaphor to “suggest that rhetorical effectiveness can only be assigned retroactively, not as a characteristic of the rhetor and her craft but as an emergent property of the conditions made possible by the interaction of virus, environment, and hosts” (p. 56). Thus, distribution, circulation, and trajectory of the text are tied up in multiple forces, many of which are beyond the rhetor’s control—an idea discussed earlier in this chapter. This provides many difficulties when examining online texts, like petitions, that are used in a variety of ways. Online petitions encourage this sort of viral circulation through their very design and purpose, which requires

\textsuperscript{10} It is also worth mentioning that petitions tap into the interaction aspect of digital circulation that Porter (2009) discusses. As petitions are forms of design that “critically engage the user and that even invite the audience to co-produce knowledge” (p. 218) through asking users to sign onto the cause and actively pursue it, they are also interactive digital texts, though perhaps not to as great of an extent as other digital texts that invite users to remix or remediate them.

\textsuperscript{11} For example, Hawk (2012) writes: “Circulation is viral and emergent, via word of mouth and digitally enhanced through circulation and individualized searches” (p. 176).
physical markers of circulation (signatures) to illustrate the force of the document, making them a fitting artifact for such an investigation.

**Rhetorical Velocity**

In order for an online petition to fulfill its intended purpose, it must engage enough support through reaching as many potential audience members as possible. However, this can be a complicated process—for any public text circulated online, as “all successful public rhetoric is successful only if it effectively negotiates the material-cultural challenges of circulation, including challenges related to production, reproduction, and distribution” (Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012, p. 63). The creators of online petitions face a number of questions when initially producing their text: Which site do I pick to host my petition? What should the title be? How can I get my message across succinctly and clearly? Should I distribute via social media or email, or just leave it up to the interface of the site itself? After they have completed their part in composing and initially distributing the petition via whatever means they have chosen, they must rely on the text’s ability to appeal to its audience so that the petition can acquire more signatures.

Within this process of creation, petitioners are aware of the necessity for their text to appeal to others enough for them to share it with their own social circles, and so on. This desire for “rhetorical velocity” is defined as “a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). Though Ridolfo and DeVoss introduce the term in regards to digital texts and their “re-appropriation by third parties” via the processes of digital distribution and circulation, I feel that their term encapsulates the concerns that petitioners face, as composers of texts that are created literally to be circulated among large numbers of people. While citizens are not composing their petitions and considering the same exact questions that someone creating a press release or a newsreel may be (as texts that are created with the knowledge that they will be split up, rearranged, and co-opted by others), they are anticipating the same sorts of issues: How will this be shared? How will my ideas translate via different avenues of exposure? What will audiences find compelling about my text? And though an online petition may not be designed specifically for re-appropriation, as a digital text,
elements of the text (or the text as a whole) are subject to such a process. Links to online petitions can show up just about anywhere on the Web, along with excerpts from the petition itself, and can positioned as positive, neutral, or negative appropriations, according to Ridolfo and DeVoss’ categories. Further, the texts of petitions themselves do show up in other formats than the original host website: they appear as links on personal websites, icons on social media sites, and pull quotes or embedded images in traditional print media stories. Each of these instances is an example of “amplification,” or the process through which a digital text accumulates a broader and more intense span of influence. Online petitions are literally composed for such a process, and require it to function as they are intended to. So, although the term is readily applied to texts explicitly designed to be remixed, I think that rhetorical velocity’s requirement of “a careful consideration of the future time (and particular moments) and place(s) of where, how, and potentially into what texts may be recomposed—and what this may mean” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) is valuable in a discussion about online petitions.

If the original petitioner is aware of the need for the petition to reach a wide number or variety of people in a short amount of time, she will be more likely to compose a text that will engage with such an audience and will, in fact, have a high measure of rhetorical velocity, ultimately increasing its chances for greater levels of circulation. Given the purpose and function of a petition, many petitioners are most likely aware of this concern, further emphasizing circulation as a key aspect of this genre from the start of the composition process. Additionally, since online petitions are often composed in response to some sort of public dilemma or issue, the chronological and kairotic time of the text is also important. When considering the uses of online petitions to foster democratic action, the kairotic moment is extremely important due to the time constraints attached to many public issues.

Citizens who wish to use online petitions to protest a public concern should be aware of the implications of the complex process of digital circulation. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel (2012) claim that “…rhetors who aim to facilitate rhetorical velocity and recomposition need to consider these same infrastructural concerns—access to resources such as human expertise, software, hardware, and network connectivity—as they relate to audience” (78). In addition to these concerns, rhetors also need to consider their
motivations and desired outcomes in creating the petition in the first place, as different populations would respond differently to online forms of civic engagement than others, and not all petition-hosting sites appeal to all audiences—to name just two concerns. Citizens who choose to use online petitions must be aware of these rhetorical choices, and must compose their texts (and choose the hosting site) carefully. Obviously, the digital qualities of these texts create many considerations for citizens who wish to utilize them for civic improvement.

Effects of Digital Circulation

Digital circulation is a unique process that differs from traditional print circulation due to the effects that modern technology has on the form. The two most important differences that persuade me to argue that online petitions are their own genre are that the digital has caused a shift in physical constraints of circulation, and that the Internet allows for multiple avenues of access to individual petitions, potentially altering the ways that these texts are composed and shared. This shift also suggests that online petitions can be used in situations that their print predecessors could not, such as to increase awareness about an incredibly time-sensitive issue that requires public outcry as opposed to an institutional response.

Shifts in physical constraints. The use of the Internet offers very specific affordances in the process of circulation, perhaps most notably the increase in access, speed, and range available to users. Additionally, the very structure of the Internet, with ever-increasing network speed and equally expansive geographical reach, eliminates many of the time and physical constraints that print petitions are subject to. Now, a user can compose a digital petition and send a link to it via email or social media in less than a minute—to someone hundreds of thousands miles away. As noted above, this could open up the possibilities for citizens to use online petitions for issues that print petitions would have little to no impact on. At the same time, it is important to note that the ability to share petitions across the globe, particularly if they are concerned with local causes, may not be helpful, or may even be harmful, due to the local nature of some issues. This fact
emphasizes that petitioners must carefully evaluate the methods they use to attempt change so that they choose a channel appropriate to their circumstances\textsuperscript{12}.

**Multiple avenues of access.** Print petitions are typically limited in range and number; that is, while there may be many copies of petitions distributed in a community, they will most likely be available at similar places or through a small group of people. This limits the amount of access to the petitions, as well as the numbers of people that can sign them. But, with online petitions, the original petitioner does not have to play as big a role in sharing her petition with others; in fact, the infrastructure of the Web makes it so that the petition is more easily viewed and shared, regardless of her efforts. For instance, the use of social media seems logical for the circulation of online petitions. When the online petitions first appeared on the Internet, they were often disseminated through email. Now, online petitions are regularly circulated via social media, and the petition hosting sites encourage this. Under each active petition, We the People provides a “Promote this Petition” bar, which allows users to link the petition directly to Facebook and Twitter. To the left of each petition on MoveOn Petitions, the site provides an embedded text code that allows users to link to the petition from personal websites, as well as social media. The interfaces of social media sites like Facebook, tumblr, and Twitter all encourage the reposting and re-sharing of content, so presumably, links to petitions can be re-shared from other social media users without having to even visit the original site, increasing the potential paths for a text’s circulation.

In addition to the capability of sharing individual petitions on one’s own page, both MoveOn Petitions and We the People have official Twitter and Facebook presences, and users who visit their homepages are encouraged to “follow” them. This represents an effort to not only view the sites as resources for posting and sharing one’s own petitions, but to view the sites as hubs of important democratic activity. This dual-role of the sites’ functions encourages users to take on increasingly active roles in social movements, and to keep up with the exchanges going on via these forums. This facet of online petitions

\textsuperscript{12} As was noted in the last chapter, the rules for each site are also important to consider in light of circulation practices. For example, We the People’s requirement that a petition receive 150 signatures before it is even visible and searchable on the site presents a barrier for petitioners, who must be able to distribute the petition to a wide enough network before it can benefit from the extra outlets of circulation outlined in this chapter.
suggests that “…the roles of online participation adopted by protestors are greatly multiplying and expanding, particularly due to the affordances of emergent digital technologies” (Penney & Dadas, 2014, p. 89). These multiple avenues of influence are one affordance of digital technology, and also serve in the process of amplification that Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) discuss.

The public digital presence of online petitions also exposes them to outside forces, potentially forces with no vested interest in the movement—including the news media. Major news organizations often feature stories about an online petition that has mobilized passionate citizens and has encouraged some change—often before the request in the petition has actually been granted, suggesting that the informal pressure exerted by the media on the petitionee has had some effect on the granting of the request. For example, on May 5, 2014, I typed “news + online petitions” into the Google Search bar, and all 16 hits on the first page of search results were all articles posted within the last 24 hours—about 10 separate online petitions. Clearly garnering traditional media attention could be considered one “rhetorical objective” (Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012, p. 96) with online petitions, given the ease with which they circulate and can be accessed. After all, calls from journalists exert a different sort of pressure on institutions than a list of signatures. And while media attention could result from the circulation of print, it is easier for news organizations to discover these petitions when they are posted online. The increased access to online petitions via social and traditional media represents the many channels of influence that petitioners who choose to utilize sites like We the People and MoveOn Petitions may encounter.

Additionally, the petition hosting sites are aware of this potential; in fact, MoveOn Petitions features a webpage titled “How to Get Media Attention.” In addition to providing several pointers for users of the site to garner attention from the press about their causes, the page states the following: “Generating local media on progressive issues is a major part of how MoveOn Councils put pressure on public officials and demonstrate widespread support for our issues.” The page lays out these four supporting reasons for gaining press: to influence decision makers, to persuade the public, to provide legitimacy, and to develop leadership. The inclusion of this explicit urge to seek out media attention as a means of establishing a reciprocal relationship between press and signatures earned,
as well as the inclusion of a “Featured in” marker on Change.org petitions, suggests that media attention may not be just an added bonus of online petitions, but another key affordance of digital access.

The purpose and function of online petitions is the embodiment of digital circulation; through this process, online petitions have the opportunity to be amplified, shared, and appropriated through a variety of digital channels. The increased range of circulation through social and traditional media illustrates that the form ought to be considered its own genre. While online petitions strive for awareness and social change, like print petitions, they gather their power through a unique extended network that allows them to be distributed and circulated at higher rates and through different means than ever before.

**Digital Circulation’s Implications for Democracy**

Having established the importance of digital circulation for understanding the genre of online petitions, I would now like to discuss the implications of the process on the democratic exchanges that unfold via online petitions. Digital circulation increases levels of publicity and suggests the formation and presence of publics, both integral to democratic processes. Both the potential to increase levels of publicity, and to offer other avenues to cultivate publicity, as well as to inform groups of citizens can be seen as functions that can encourage higher levels of inclusion and justice, as central concerns of democracy outlined in Chapter One.

**Publicity**

Dean (2002) claims that, “Publicity is the organizing element of democratic politics and the golden ring of infotainment society” (p. 15). We live in a world where nearly every aspect of our lives is public in some form or fashion, which has, by many accounts, disrupted the boundaries between public and private. Habermas (1989) distinguishes between critical publicity, or the public opinion informed by rational reasoning, and manipulative publicity, which is engineered and appears as public opinion: “In the realm of the mass media, of course, publicity has changed its meaning. Originally a function of public opinion, it has become an attribute of whatever attracts public opinion: public relations and efforts baptized as ‘publicity work’ are aimed at
producing such a publicity” (p. 2). So, according to Habermas, publicity is no longer an organic reflection of the public’s will, but instead is an engineered representation of what the public may desire or approve of. Barton (2005) further explains that “instead of promoting or enabling rational-critical debate in a public sphere” the modern mass media creates a falsified public interest represented through a mass inundated with media messages, as opposed to a public that comes to its own conclusions through discussion (p. 181). I believe that since online petitions emerge from individuals or groups of citizens concerned with particular issues, they are manifestations of critical publicity and are not inherently manipulated by the media. They are the result of concerned citizens attempting to raise awareness about certain issues, which is more organic than publicity via the news media.

Due to their form that allows varied modes of discourse (further discussed in the next two chapters), they also uphold the idea that “communication among perspectives that transcend one another preserves plurality”—a condition of publicity put forth by Young (1996, p. 127). So, online petitions are texts that represent authentic public concerns and embody the democratic values of deliberation and discussion, and their digital status further emphasizes this relationship. The circulation of petitions increases the number of people who see the documents, as well as the number of opportunities for users to share the document in order for more exposure to both individuals and larger groups. Digital circulation enables this sharing to occur at greater levels and speeds, as well as exposing online petitions to more chances for publicity due to the greater numbers of hubs for sharing such texts on the Internet. An understanding that this is a likely course for a petition to follow is important in the composition of such documents. Ryder (2012) points out that, “when we understand the rhetorical moves that people use in social networking sites to create independence and reinforce a sense of capacity, we can see that a great deal of public formation relies on peoples ability to not only to generate discourse, but also to circulate it” (p. 230). This concern for rhetorical strategies and how they impact circulation will be further discussed in Chapter Three’s analysis of the creation templates for each site. Higher levels of publicity can contribute to higher levels of exposure to citizens, increasing the rhetorical momentum of the text. Most importantly,
democracy and publicity go hand in hand. Dean (2002) writes that as democracy demands publicity, it demands that issues and concerns are available for all to discuss.

**Public Formation**

While circulation is an important concept in a discussion of how online petitions generate social action, the process is also key in forming publics, or groups that “[consist] of the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (Hauser, 2008, p. 32). Publics are not homogenous, and in fact, provide opportunities for various opinions to be heard. Nor are they pre-determined—they form because of discursive exchanges. This approach, however, is quite different from Habermas’ (1989) conception of public formation, which holds that the process occurs when private citizens gather together in order to decide what issues are of concern, only to discuss them afterwards (p. 176). For Habermas, publics do not form around particular issues and feature the following standards of participation: a disregard for status, a domain of common concern, and the openness of the public to all concerned citizens—standards achieved through the use of critical-rational debate, which is available to all willing participants because it presumably removes the obstacles that personal experience inevitably provides for public discussion. Though I discussed the privileging of facts over emotions as a marker of critical-rational discussion in the first chapter, this distinction does not mean that the use of facts altogether and logical reasoning are implicitly critical-rational in nature; rather, it just implies that the privileging of such forms of communication negates the values and insight that more subjective modes bring.

A model of public formation focused on the circulation of texts, as Warner (2002) puts forth, does imply a wider variety of communication styles (given that texts are diverse in approaches, audiences, and structures). His definition of “public” focuses on the necessity of discourse in forming a public—more specifically, the circulation of discourse as the impetus for bringing publics into existence. He writes that, “the notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts” among strangers who become,

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13 And yes, texts—Warner writes that, “no single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium” (p. 90). This is a valid, and important claim, and it is equally important to understand that this project accepts that these
by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity” (pp. 11-12). This product of circulation is incredibly important to understanding the role of digital petitions in the formation of publics, as petitions are texts which not only point to the existence of a public, but denote particular members of the public via their signatures. Additionally, he writes that the texts do not exist purely for those who agree or disagree with it but rather, “In addressing a public, however, even texts of the most rigorously argumentative and dialogic genres also address onlookers, not just parties to argument” (p. 90). Thus, texts are not necessarily the embodiment of a public, but do allow us to envision one and know that it exists.

Warner claims that publics are not concrete; rather, they exist on a continuum, and participants can enter and leave by way of attention to the issue. As attention to public issues wax and wane, so do publics. This attention is directly linked back to circulation and the sharing of discourse. “Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation” (p. 91), and clearly petitions are meant to be circulated among a public in order to get more signatures. A public is self-organized by discourse, “but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (p. 106). So, though a public is an organic creation in response to some sort of public exigency, other existing systems assist in that creation—like cultural and social practices that encourage the circulation of texts like petitions14. Warner’s model of public formation, which privileges not only communication but also the circulation of texts, illustrates that the presence and circulation of online petitions signify the existence of publics.

In addition to illustrating the existence of publics, which are sites of intervention (Rice, 2012), circulation of online petitions potentially expands the presence and reach of publics. Ryder (2012) points out that, “The challenge of public-formation, then, is to understand how broadly the public discourse needs to circulate (what it will take to empower the capacity of that public) and to understand what channels one can use or

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14 However, he notes that material blockages to accessing a public can harm a citizen’s sense of agency, and things like voting are “poor substitutes” for an organic public (p. 71).
create for that circulation” (p. 99). While composing a text is important, understanding how it may or needs to be distributed, and how it may be further circulated, is incredibly important as well.

**Inclusion and Justice**

Through the increased opportunities for public exposure and public formation provided by digital circulation processes, online petitions may be tools that can be used to increase institutional levels of inclusion and justice. Young (2000) writes that a democratic decision is legitimate “only if all those affected by it are included in the process of discussion and decision-making” (p. 23). While the circulation of an online petition does not guarantee that every single stakeholder will see and respond to the petition, the expansive reach of digital circulation is a step towards greater levels of access and availability. Similarly, online petitions and their cultural status, as well as their malleability (a concept that will be discussed in the next two chapters), also represent texts that may be used to increase levels of justice—defined as “the institutionalized conditions that make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decision-making, and to express their feelings, experience, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen” (Young, 2000, p. 91). It is important to point out that online petitions do not feature much deliberation on the texts themselves—those who sign the petition are able to post a comment in support of the cause, but that action could hardly be considered deliberation, especially because there is no established place for a dissenter to voice their opinion. But, as digital texts that are easily shared and linked, someone who disagrees with a petition may link to it on their own webpage or social media profile, and explain their opinions and viewpoints in that forum, potentially sparking more discussion. So, online petitions are not perfect documents, but through digital circulation, they do have increased potential for being shared among larger groups and more members of the community with digital access, exposing more citizens to the public conversations occurring and encouraging them to take part.
Digital Democracy—Re-Visited

As suggested above, there are many factors that contribute to the success (or failure) of online petitions, as well as the action they are meant to ignite. An ecological approach to the complexities that arise as a part of circulation allows us to better understand the multi-faceted existence of online petitions. As more texts are placed online for distribution and circulation, more individuals and systems have a hand in shaping their dissemination and reception, and so new models of rhetorical theory are needed for a digital age. Gries (2012) reconceptualizes rhetorical agency as rhetorical actancy, which privileges the role of relationships in interactions. “Rhetorical agency emerges from this dynamic extended activity of intra-action between human and non-human, virtual and actual, historical and contemporary entities” (p. 73). As circulation involves texts moving in these channels that are inhabited by both humans and non-humans, understanding this movement as more nuanced than merely passing from person to person is necessary. When “Rhetors look forward to and anticipate the nature of circulation that they desire for their compositions” (Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012, p. 73), they are engaging in an ecological mindset, keeping in mind the interfaces of the sites, the means by which they intend to spread the petition, and the many issues that can surface in this process—including human actors.

The first chapter established that many petitions are composed and circulated by those who are actively trying to engage in democratic discourse. Salter (2003) writes that though it is tempting to focus on the powers latent in the amorphous concept of the Internet, the interactions that take place between humans and technology are what actually matter—tapping into this ecological perspective of technology introduced above. While he writes that, “[t]he Internet enables social movement groups and organizations to communicate, to generate information, and to distribute this information cheaply and effectively, allowing response and feedback” (p. 129), he also critiques the increasing rate at which the Internet is becoming standardized and controlled by corporate forces. Similar to Habermas’ (1989) discussion of the destruction of newspapers as a forum for discussion by capitalistic influences, Salter implies that the potential of the Internet to serve as a similarly democratic arena is also diminishing. This is a significant critique, and a reality that does affect the future validity and use of online petitions; as such, this
examination of online petitions is timely and pertinent. These texts offer the opportunity for citizens to engage in democratic discourse with one another, and with the government. Though most online genres have characteristics that can be traced back to more traditional genres, “composing in the digital age is different than traditional practices of composing. Rhetorical practices in a digital age are different than traditionally conceived” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). Both the composition and circulation of such texts, as well as our understandings of how these texts work, must be more nuanced than ever before.

This chapter argued that though an understanding of an online petition’s social action is important in conceptualizing the genre, the process of digital circulation is what actually defines the genre itself. Additionally, I discussed the importance of composing for rhetorical velocity and outlined some of the outcomes of digital circulation that contribute to the social capital of online petitions. The process of digital circulation is important to our understanding of how online petitions function, as well as how they work within democratic processes, with the “rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, distributed, recomposed, re-delivered, redistributed, etc., across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). The possibilities that come along with online circulation position digital petitions as unique and potentially quite effective forms of discourse that citizens can use to further a variety of causes. Perhaps most importantly, the concept of circulation fits with the discussion of democracy that was laid out in Chapter One; circulation aims to gain large audiences and get them involved, and the Internet provides more opportunities for more exposure and more involvement. Ryder (2011) writes that,

Klein, Habermas, Fraser and Barber all call for more theorizing about new kinds of democratic participation, a process that simultaneously celebrates the diversity of participants, recognizes that the public sphere is always a site of conflict about its own structure, and moves beyond the individualist, reactive practices of autonomy and towards the creation of circular, reciprocal, deliberative bonds among the participants. (p. 192)

Online petitions, though obviously evolved from an older print form, are a new form of democratic participation due to the process of digital circulation in which they must
engage. These texts, through their expanded opportunities for increasing publicity and forming publics, represent these “circular, reciprocal” bonds Ryder points out. While their intended social action is an important aspect of the purposes of these texts, the unique process of digital circulation is what truly makes online petitions both an effective and interesting genre of public writing. Through digital circulation, petitions are more expansive than ever before, and provide greater chances for citizens to engage with one another, as well as with their government. This suggests that those who utilize and support online petitions feel that democracy is a system that has many paths of communication and potential nodes of influence—it is, as discussed in the first chapter, a complex entity.

In the next chapter, I continue discussing the impact that digital technology has had on the genre of the petition by performing a visual analysis of the homepages and creation templates of both We the People and MoveOn Petitions. This analysis will continue to explore the markers of online petitions as a genre, as well as the messages about democracy that are being conveyed through the sites themselves.
CHAPTER THREE:
VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERFACES FOR WE THE PEOPLE
AND MOVEON PETITIONS

While the second chapter of this project examined the form and function of online petitions through the process of digital circulation, this chapter aims to build on that exploration of the ways digital technology potentially affects the creation and dissemination of online texts. Digital circulation has tangible consequences for online petitions, in the form of increased publicity and assistance in the formation of publics, as well as in the form itself, which manifests in texts contoured to high levels of circulation. This chapter further investigates the markers of this digital form.

Webpages are one example of new media that are heavily visual, often containing several visual elements in addition to alphabetic text. Wysocki (2003) points out that visual arrangements are persuasive in nature, and so should be understood in regards to both their connections on the page and their social context (pp. 2-3). In this chapter, I examine how We the People and MoveOn Petitions position themselves in the democratic process through a visual analysis of each site’s interfaces. This analysis, informed by Barthes (1964) and Wysocki (2003), focuses on the webpages and creation processes of each site in order to examine what assumptions are being made about democratic exchange through the visual markers of these interfaces. Users derive meaning from these websites by interpreting the interplay between the alphabetic text and images present on the pages, a meaning-making process that concerns both Barthes and Wysocki, whose works provide a helpful lens for discerning the connections between the various elements on these pages. In a close reading of the creation templates, further informed by Fagerjord’s (2005) divisions of template aspects into genre, interface, and design prescripts (or already-written parts of templates), I will also address the rhetorical suggestions that accompany the templates as moves to shape the online genre. To conclude this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of each site’s design on user understandings of justice, democracy, and rhetoric.

The main goal of this chapter is to illustrate the importance of visual design to online petition sites, and to show how these aspects communicate certain ideas about
democracy. More specifically, I use this analysis to suggest that We the People’s homepage and creation templates encourage petitioners to create texts more aligned with critical-rational norms, while MoveOn Petitions embodies a more communicative approach for its users, encouraging a wider variety in forms of democratic discourse in online petitions.

The Importance of Interfaces and Templates

Interfaces are the systems we see and use when we utilize digital technology. For example, when one gets on their laptop to surf the Internet, the operating system and the Internet browser both serve as interfaces—entities that shape a user’s experience in particular ways. Because these sorts of technologies have become commonplace, their use often goes unexamined, but Selfe & Selfe (1994) argue that we must look at computers and their interfaces critically in order to understand them. That is, interfaces often work according to systems that privilege certain modes of thought or ideas. Arola (2010) critiques the fact that an interface and subsequent design template are often predetermined for users of social media sites because it hampers web authoring; consequently, the same is true for these petition sites meant to encourage civic participation. Though the interface of a petition website can seem neutral, “interfaces do rhetorical work. If we are to critically engage with the rhetoric of the interface and critically engage with Web 2.0, we must pay attention to how Web 2.0 interfaces are shaping our interactions and ourselves” (p. 7). By providing specific and standardized pages that one must scroll through and complete in order to sign or post a petition, these sites are establishing norms for a particular mode of discourse, thereby shaping the format and genre of online petitions.

By acknowledging the fact that interfaces are not neutral, and do, in fact, reflect the ideologies of those who created them, users can better understand how their perceptions of the sites may or may not fit with the messages put forth by the sponsoring organizations. Additionally, interfaces have very little impact until humans begin interacting with them. As Heim (1993) argues, “Interface denotes a contact point…It is our interaction with software that creates an interface” (as cited in Selber, 2004, p. 140). Interfaces are designed to encourage interaction—these petition websites exist so that citizens may engage with the interface to create and share texts that are ultimately meant
to enact social change and increase levels of justice. Carnegie (2009) argues that the design of an interface is meant to enable human experience. “Because the interface is the means and place of interaction, it follows that the interface functions rhetorically by creating interactivity. In other words, the modes of interactivity are the rhetorical modes of the interface” (p. 166). Not only do We the People and MoveOn Petitions create environments of interactivity, they create experiences that shape notions of online petitions. Additionally, they shape perceptions of democratic discourse by tapping into familiar tropes such as equality, inclusion, and justice.

In addition to the homepages of We the People and MoveOn Petitions, the creation process that petitioners must go through is also an interface. These creation templates, or standard forms users must complete, are incredibly significant for the final forms that these online petitions take. With this sort of digital writing, we must be prepared to view online compositions as belonging to genres that encourage “complex relations between creators, texts, audiences, various technologies for creation and consumption, and the makers of those technologies” (Fagerjord, 2005). When composing online texts meant to encourage social change via mass digital circulation, it is important to understand the impact that tools, interfaces, and templates have. “They can focus attention to particular aspects of writing, or they can create an immersive, interactive experience that motivates writers. They can bracket and privilege textual production over other concerns, such as page layout or design. In other words, tools are anything but neutral” (van Ittersum & Ching, 2013). Templates used to create persuasive, participatory texts can be seen as such texts themselves; thus, we can read them as such in order to discern what qualities they encourage in the texts that they help to create.

Through an analysis of the homepages and creation processes for each site, I hope to illustrate the ways that these digital interfaces shape online petitions and demonstrate certain approaches towards democracy.

Methodology

My methods for analysis in this chapter are mainly informed by two works: Barthes’ “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964) and Wysocki’s “The Multiple Media of Texts” (2003), both of which outline methods for analyzing visual texts. Wysocki
suggests three major steps for a visual analysis: first, name the visual elements; second, name the designed relationships among those elements; and third, consider how the elements connect with other situational aspects, including the audience (p. 13). This sequence is meant to encourage a consideration of the elements both on their own, and as a unit working together on the page. Wysocki highlights several parts of visual pages, including the page or screen itself, the elements on the page, the aspects that help readers connect between pages or images, and what contains the page or screen (p. 4). She also offers an extensive discussion of font characteristics, shapes, colors, and photographs, explaining how these elements can help composers make their arguments in particular ways. Barthes’ methods complement this structure by bringing in the reality of connotation and denotation, potentially leading to important distinctions in viewing artifacts that reference cultural ideals like democracy, as these petition sites do. Barthes identifies three layers of meaning present in each captured image: the linguistic message (that has both denoted and connoted meanings); the symbolic or coded message (consisting of what the visual elements suggest); and the literal or non-coded message (the objects or elements actually shown in the image). The linguistic message refers to the alphabetic text present in the image, and can be read literally or symbolically. As for visual elements of the display, they have both symbolic and literal readings—similar to linguistic elements.

For my analytical approach, I am meshing these two strategies together: I will first examine the visual elements of each page, both coded and non-coded. Next, I will discuss the linguistic features of the page, including titles, headers, captions, and other portions of text. Finally, I will discuss the relationships among these linguistic and visual elements as well as their connections to “different audiences, contexts, and arguments” (Wysocki, 2003, p. 13). This sequence will allow for a detailed reading of the textual and visual elements of each site, which I will then relate to the elements of the democratic models discussed in Chapter One. Through such a discussion, I hope to emphasize that the visual elements of each site do convey a particular understanding of the democratic process. “Thus the rhetoric of the image…is specific to the extent that it is subject to the physical constraint of vision…but general to the extent that the figures are never more than formal relations of elements” (Barthes, 1964, p. 282). That is, though the visual
elements of each page can be distilled out of the overall layout, they have all been placed into one page, and therefore function as an entire unit and should be viewed as such.

For my analysis of the creation templates, I follow the pattern established above, but I will organize the discussion of my analysis via the prescript categories that Fagerjord (2005) establishes of interface, design, and genre. This division will allow me to discuss with more clarity the similarities and differences between each site’s creation processes and what impact they may have on the petitions.

**Visual Analysis of Homepages**

Wysocki (2003) points out that the visual presentation of a screen provides an instant idea about its messages and motivations. Looking at the webpages of We the People and MoveOn Petitions, users immediately understand that each serves as a page for these online petition sites, given the menu bars across the top of the pages, as well as the logos prominently displayed for each site. Additionally, these pages encourage users to sign up and utilize their resources, as both display prominent buttons asking users to create their own petitions (Figs. 1 and 2, found below). Examining the individual features of the pages, as well as how they connect to one another and larger social contexts, allow us to understand more about the genres to which these pages are contributing.

*Figure 1: We the People’s homepage*
We the People

We the People’s homepage (Fig. 1) is very cleanly designed, with a coordinating color scheme of blue, white, and green. Though the screen contains a large amount of text, it is spread out across a vast amount of white space. Additionally, the green banner across the top of the page, combined with the artistically framed picture of The White House, prevent the smaller portions of text from appearing as a united body and overwhelming the user. Designed in a hierarchical layout, the navigation bar for the executive branch of the government’s website stretches across the top of the page, nestled just underneath a graphic illustration of The White House. Wysocki (2003) points out that the headers of a page are an important aspect of the page layout, and communicate to the reader “that these sections contain the…most important points of the argument; on the page, they construct the logical arrangement of the argument for the reader” (p. 2). Following this logic, the components of the executive branch linked through the navigation bar are considered to be of the utmost importance, considering that the entire process for the site stems from the authority of this branch of government.

The hierarchy continues further down the page, as the site’s banner takes up about a fourth of the total page space, showing the logo and the slogan, “Your voice in our government”, with “voice” slightly emphasized through bolder, brighter text. This banner also contains several links, which lead the user to the creation template, to open petitions, to responses resulting from petitions, and to a page explaining the background of the site. The middle of the page features the picture of The White House, with the camera facing upwards toward the sky, complementing two more text-heavy portions of the page: simplified directions on how the petitioning process works, found below the picture, and three links to featured responses, as well as the three most recent petitions, along the right side of the page. The photograph of the White House (as well as the smaller graphic of the structure located at the top of the page’s center) has a direct meaning as an un-coded object in Barthes’ approach, but as a coded object, it holds many positive connotations, including power, prestige, a sense of direct action, and the Executive Branch of the American government. The other elements of the site that emphasize the importance of this channel of communication contribute to this signification of access to the democratic process. Each of these elements appears tied together through the shared color scheme, as
well as the uniform styles of text and placement of visual elements on the page, which reflects Wysocki’s point that the designer of the text has the ability to “pick and choose among available strategies to build a text” that conveys a particular understanding about the page’s purpose (2003, p.3). In this case, each element works with the others to portray a complete picture of how the process works and what it means. The prominence of the sky photograph serves as a backdrop for most of the text on the page, and as the only prominent image on the page, draws the audience in immediately. This image connects to the textual claim that the site is “Giving all Americans a way to engage their government on the issues that matter to them”—a phrase emphasized on the page itself. As Barthes argues, the text in an image can anchor the meaning of the picture; so, the audience’s interpretation of the photograph of the White House is assumedly guided by the text’s proclamation that the government is hearing their concerns.

The steps for using the site are laid out in the bottom left of the page, and arranged logically, left to right; first, “Browse open petitions to find a petition related to your issue, and add your signature,” then, “If your issue is not currently represented by an active petition, start a new petition,” and third, “If a petition meets the signature threshold, it will be reviewed by the Administration and we will issue a response.” This sequence is significant because it reveals that We the People encourages users to browse existing petitions—something that the creation template also does. Further, below each of the three descriptions of the steps for using the site, the link is placed below a line reading, in all capital letters, “TAKE ACTION.” This positioning suggests that users, through just browsing or reading elements of the site, are already participating in the civic actions encouraged by the site, tapping into citizens’ desires to be engaged with their communities and governments. Perhaps the most interesting rhetorical choice on this homepage is the placement on the page’s right side of featured responses (selected by those in charge of the website) above the most recently user-created petitions. This suggests that the site wishes to highlight those instances where an institutional response is evoked, given the prominent placement of those featured responses.

The visual and textual aspects of this page can also be viewed in relation to other contextual and audience considerations, as Wysocki (2003) claims that visual aspects of a text are “to be understood not simply in terms of physiology but also in terms of social
context” (p.3). For example, the graphic elements that highlight words and phrases explicitly connect the audience to the established purpose of the site: “Your voice in our government,” a phrase that taps into the cultural narrative surrounding a popular conception of democracy. Additionally, the photograph of The White House and the graphic logo of the building are both placed in the center of the page, drawing the viewer’s attention immediately—presumably an intentional placement (Wysocki, p.9). This serves to remind the user of the site’s direct link to the executive branch, and by association, the President himself. Again, the image of the White House conveys a number of meanings to the audience, all of which are meant to illustrate the power connected to this process of petitioning through the website.

All together, the text and images on this page communicate the message that users of this site should feel as if they are interacting with the government, an entity that wants them to voice their concerns. Though there is a large amount of text on the page, the picture of the White House with the blue sky in the background serves as an anchor for the entire page, uniting elements together and emphasizing this view of the government.

Figure 2: MoveOn Petition’s homepage
MoveOn Petitions

Figure 2 displays the homepage of MoveOn.org’s petition site. It has more unique visual elements than We the People’s homepage, including the preview of a video explaining the site’s mission and a picture that links to a short story about a recent “victory,” the term the site uses to describe a petition that has been noticed and has resulted in some sort of actual change. The large images instantly draw a user in, while the red, white, and blue color scheme clearly hearkens to the colors of the American flag, emphasizing petitions as a way to engage in American society. The homepage features two buttons that allow a user to start a petition: a bright red button towards the middle of the screen that reads, “Start a Petition Campaign” underneath a short description of the site, which emphasizes the presence of 9 million MoveOn members that can help one achieve their goals. The other is located at the top of the page, accompanied by a small icon that depicts a notepad and a pen. Directly next to that icon is another that links users to their currently existing petitions, and in the right-hand corner, the navigation bar for the site features several options, all in thick blue text: applying for funding, finding hints and tips for using the site, an about page, and the option to donate money to the organization. These options are constant, found on each page—presumably to give users as many paths as possible to access these features of the site.

The largest visual aspect of the page, the embedded video, features a still image of a woman holding a sign, presumably at a public demonstration. This links the site to our notions of community activism, an idea emphasized by the text located directly to the right of the image, which notes the large number of MoveOn members and invites users to “Tap into our shared people power and create progressive change.” In this case, the text helps users to understand the image. As Barthes (1964) writes, “when it comes to the ‘symbolic message’, the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation, constituting a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating…” (p. 275). While on its own, the picture of the woman holding the sign could be interpreted in a number of different ways, the text adjacent to the picture primes the audience for the kind of interpretation the site encourages. Directly below the embedded video and red button for starting a campaign (bordered by a blue rectangle) located in the middle of the page, are both success stories and “hot petitions.” Instead of
featuring responses to petitions that have reached certain thresholds, MoveOn features “Victories,” or images representing petitions that have impacted some sort of change in the physical world, along the left side of the page (and continue as one scrolls down the page). As I pointed out in Chapter One, these success stories are written in press release format, providing information about the outcome of the petition and a link to the original text. In the right column of the page are titles and descriptions of petitions that are currently being circulated, along with a smaller red button that reads, “Sign this petition.” As one scrolls down the page, more images and descriptions continue to fill the screen, giving the viewer a sense of both the potential of these documents, as well as the successes that have come along with them.

Similar to We The People, MoveOn Petition’s home page presents information in clear and concise ways, aided by sans serif fonts and a united color scheme. The choice of fonts is significant because it communicates a modern time period, channeling the “rationality of the Enlightenment,” while a serif font such as Times New Roman would imply a more classic approach (Wysocki, 2003, p. 5). Because of the image that the site seems to be projecting, that of a progressive, people-powered entity, it seems appropriate that the site would opt for a clean design, accompanied by modern font styles. Additionally, the page appears to be functioning as one organism because of the repetition of colors and buttons throughout the page. For example, the page effectively utilizes white space, and a large rectangle of blue sets off the embedded video and the most prominent segment of text. Red, however, is only used three times on the page—each time, in an element that explicitly contains the word “petition.” Once in the logo of the site in the top right corner, once on a button to allow a user to start a petition, and once on a button to allow a user to sign an already-existing petition. So through this usage, red is conceptually linked to petitions, and though it is used sparingly, it is noticeable on the page. As I initially stated, MoveOn Petitions’ homepage contains less text overall than We the People, and is instead dominated by images; however, this does not mean that the text is less important for this page. Rather, as Barthes points out, linguistic cues guide the interpretation of images, and each image on this homepage has accompanying text that encourages a specific interpretation. For example, the photo of the group under “Recent Victories” is identified as a group positively affected by the
website, given the positioning of the text and image. Without the caption, the image could be interpreted in any number of ways—as a picture of MoveOn volunteers, as a picture of petitioners waiting for a result, and so on.

Since the homepages of these sites are what greet potential, new, and established users of these sites, they are important portals that can impact a user’s opinion of the site. Further, the homepages convey particular ideas about the site to users through both words and visual cues, so an examination of the visual and textual contents of these homepages can provide us with important information about how the sites are packaging themselves. It appears that while both We the People and MoveOn Petitions attempt to cultivate an image emphasizing the collective nature of social change and the importance of getting involved with discussions about public issues, they both ultimately privilege a different source of power. We the People emphasizes the entity’s connection to the Executive Branch of the United States government, through the images of the White House on the home page, the prominence of the executive branch’s web menu, and the focus on the institutional responses. This is a direct appeal to the ethos of the office of the President, encouraging potential users of that site that their concerns matter to the highest office in the United States. On the other hand, MoveOn Petitions, as a group not officially linked to any branch of the American government, focuses more on the power of the public, with their slogan of “People powered petitions,” the photographs that each depict groups of people gathered to support a social change, and the positioning of successful petitions as “victories” (implying that the site helps the public engage in a war or dispute with the powers that be). This sets up MoveOn Petitions as a more progressive, potentially unpredictable entity—an image that seems to align with their philosophy of “Re-Inventing People-Powered Politics” through providing “individuals and organizations with the tools to start and win their own grassroots campaigns” (“About”). Each site communicates a different conception of where authority and power originates, but both ultimately focus on the process of petitioning as an important civic activity.

Given that these are two major petition websites, this analysis is perhaps a step in illustrating the conventions of such websites that are increasingly becoming more popular. “That we associate particular visual arrangements with different genres of writing means that the visual arrangements do some of the work of the genre. This
means, then, that the visual arrangements can be analyzed in terms of the genre work they do” (Wysocki, 2003, p. 2). The messages portrayed by We the People and MoveOn Petitions reveal that both sites emphasize the collective nature of online petitions and petitioning sites, which seems to be a key to the genre itself. Additionally, the homepages themselves reveal a bit about how the genre of online petitions functions as well. In the discussion of digital circulation in Chapter Two, I suggested that two of the main outcomes of digital circulation for online petitions are the increase in publicity and the formation (or representation of the presence) of publics. Both of these ideas are visible in the homepages of We the People and MoveOn Petitions. While We the People positions the site as a format for using publicity through the petitions as a means for institutional attention, MoveOn Petitions seems to suggest that petitions are one way (of many) that publicity can be brought to these issues. The images and text on the homepage, combined with the process of the site (which states that the wishes of petitions that reach 15 signatures, align with MoveOn values, and are approved by a small set of MoveOn members are pursued by grassroots campaigns) emphasize the idea that MoveOn Petitions is a people-oriented site that aims to bring public attention to issues in a variety of ways.

Though the sites convey different attitudes towards authority and operate under different conditions, the formation of groups around issues and interests, through the creation and circulation of petitions, works with the theories of public formation outlined by Hauser (2008) and Warner (2006) in Chapter Two. We the People’s response system, where one response can refer to multiple petitions, actively creates groups of publics based on interest, and even encourages users to find and potentially join publics by asking them to search already-existing petitions for their issues. MoveOn Petitions urges the collective nature of petitions through images and through its language, communicating the presence of multiple publics throughout the page, and also allows users to search petitions based on key words and issues. This represents a process different from Habermas’ (1989) theory that publics come together in order to decide what issues are of concern. The interpretations of democratic theory gleaned through an analysis of the visual and textual elements of these petition-hosting sites enrich our understandings of modern democracy, as accessed through the Internet.
seem to emphasize the collective nature of the system, and the necessity of working together to enact social change and achieve justice for these causes, each site emphasizes a different conception of authority. I suggest that the templates used to create online petitions will reflect these messages transmitted by the homepages.

**Analysis of Creation Templates**

While the homepages of We the People and MoveOn Petitions each convey a particular idea about where the authority lies in democracy, an important concept to consider when composing a petition, the creation templates for each site hold more insight as to what assumptions about democracy are being made, as well as the genre characteristics each site implies. Given that this analysis is explicitly about creation templates, I wish to utilize the work of Fagerjord (2005) on digital templates, which outlines an understanding of how different parts of the template (specifically, the pre-existing guidelines that a user must follow) influence different aspects of the final text. Fagerjord asserts that there are three types of prescripts: interface, which limit the amount of free expression available to the user; design, which add extra channels of communication to the ones explicitly created by the user; and genre, which link the work to a specific genre. His overall argument is that each of these prescripts serves to shape the final text in very particular ways—depending on, of course, the individual template itself. He writes that, “Genres have always been patterns that guide both creators and readers. Like prescripts, genres are limiting and enabling at the same time…What is different with templates is that their genre prescripts are rigid. Traditionally, genres evolve through imitation.” With templates, users don’t imitate an already existing text on their own terms, but instead respond to the prompts provided by the template (which may very well be inspired by an existing form—as with online petitions, which will be illustrated in the next section).
General Creation Processes

Figure 3: We the People’s creation sequence, beginning with Step 1 in the top left corner and ending with Step 4 in the bottom right of the image

We the People’s creation template requires users to go through four main pages. The first asks the user to write her request concisely and to “tag” her petition by checking up to three different descriptions of policy issues. This information is then used to search the database, so that in Step 2, a list of similar petitions will come up (if there are any) so that a user doesn’t create a duplicate petition. The third step asks the user to enter a brief description of the issue and create some keywords, and the fourth is a preview page that
allows the user to post, save, edit, or delete her petition. Given that a user must have an account with the website to get to this process, and that this platform features the most required pages out of five popular petition sites (the two in this project, Change.org, The Petition Site, and iPetitions), it appears that We the People requires its users to put in more effort than most other online petitioning services, which results in fewer petitions about the same topic and potentially more polished artifacts. However, this could be viewed as a barrier to access and hampers participation.

Figure 4: MoveOn Petition’s two-step creation sequence, displayed left to right

Seemingly on the other end of the spectrum, in regards to pages of the template, MoveOn Petition’s process contains only two pages. On the first page (Fig. 4), the user is prompted to “Start your petition!” by entering in a title and main ideas about the request in the first two boxes. On that same page, she also selects a target for her petition and fills in name of the official, and also has the opportunity to provide more background about her motivations for starting the petition—a rhetorical move reminiscent of Young’s (2000) claim that narrative provides more contextual information for an audience. The second page is a preview page for the petition, where the user must enter in her personal information, and has the opportunities to read over the text of the petition she created in the prior steps and to launch her petition.
**Interface Prescripts**

Fagerjord (2005) classifies the function of interface prescripts as “making it simpler to create a text by taking away choices.” These variables often involve basic operating procedures of the template, including how often a text can be updated (or if it can be), if a text can be saved during its creation (thereby affecting its overall quality), the number of links and pictures that can be featured in a text (as well as whether these multimedia objects can even be embedded), and how long or large elements may be. Because these petition creation templates are simple in design and function, they do limit user input, hearkening back to Arola’s (2010) observation that social media platforms limit the author’s rhetorical and creative efforts. Both sites offer users a chance to review their petitions before posting them to the public part of the site, but neither site allows a user to update or edit their petition once it has been posted. Similarly, neither site allows users the option to upload pictures or hyperlinks into the text, which does keep all of the petitions’ appearance standard; however, users could still theoretically embed links into the text of the petitions, and some petitions in the sample used in Chapter Four’s analysis did make this move.

For all of these similarities, the two sites differ in interface prescripts, as well. We the People offers users a chance to save their petition and come back to it later before posting, while MoveOn Petitions offers no such saving option—this could be partly due to the more extensive creation process that We the People users must go through, but could also pertain to the site’s interest in quality submissions, as Fagerjord suggests that the ability for users to save and return to their work later may impact the overall quality of the final product. And, in regards to the length of submissions, MoveOn Petitions offers guidelines, suggesting 2-3 sentences in the text box for background information, while We the People has hard limits on both the title and the body of the petition (120 and 800 characters, respectively). Because these templates were designed to assist large numbers of people in creating online petitions that are hosted on two particular sites, it seems logical that a significant amount of creative choice would be limited via interface prescripts to ensure that the texts would all appear as elements of an established website.
Figure 5: Petition pages for We the People (above) and MoveOn Petitions (below)

**Design Prescripts**

Design prescripts sound like they may refer to the aesthetic options available to the user of a creation template, but in fact, the term refers to the already-established visual components of the page. “Templates offer more than plain text and a rough edit. All new templates for Web design will also offer good looks. Typography, colors, and layout are added to the user's text (or images). It will dress up the user's text in a coherent style, a visual design. These designs are prefabricated” (Fagerjord, 2005). For users of both We the People and MoveOn Petitions, the design options presented to them are quite limited—as noted above, they do not have an option to upload videos or links, and they
do not have the opportunity to select their own font style, change the color of their font, or alter the layout of their petition page. Instead, all of these options default to the styles displayed on each site’s homepage. As Figure 5 shows, petitions on We the People show up in a sans serif font, with the title bolded and the body of the petition in plain text. MoveOn Petitions show up in a similar way, with a red bolded title. While this does limit the means of expression available to petitioners, it does contribute to the standardization of the genre and the cohesion of the sites.

**Genre Prescripts**

Genre prescripts, or the parts of the template that explicitly point to the construction of the genre through the aspects included or emphasized, are typically related to an already-established genre. “Templates are generally made according to some well-established genre, and much of what they prescribe is actually genre conventions. In literature, film, and other media, genres are generally seen as flexible. In template systems, on the other hand, genre traits are inflexible, as they are given by the template” (Fagerjord, 2005). The empty text boxes that users must fill in, and the prompts that accompany these boxes, are genre prescripts. Both sites contain a number of text boxes and instructions, all of which contribute to shaping the final products of the templates, but they can be grouped into two different functions: some seem to encourage an adherence to traditional petition conventions, and others offer explicit rhetorical guidance geared towards considerations related to digital circulation.

**Adherence to Petition Conventions.** Historically, there seems to be no set format for petitions, besides the inclusion of three main parts: the issue being brought into question, the motivations or reasons for doing so, and the inclusion of the supporters’ names (Heerma van Voss, 2001, p. 6). These three parts are included in the templates for both We the People and MoveOn Petitions. On both sites, the first two sections filled out in the creation templates are what is being petitioned for and whom the request is being directed towards (for We the People, it is filled in already as the Obama Administration, given the nature of the site). This structure makes sense in light of the historical use of petitions—establishing what the issue is and who is being charged with responding to the issue are arguably the most important moves a petitioner makes in composing the document, as it provides its audience with an immediate context for the document. To
continue this in the digital realm by having petitioners establish this at the very beginning can also keep them on track with their own composition process, since they have established their motive and their audience at the very beginning of the process.

MoveOn’s template provides some more guidance in choosing a “target,” which will be discussed in the following section. Both sites also feature a box in later stages (Step 3 for both sites) that asks the user to expand on the reasons for this request—the second marker of a petition that Heerma van Voss points out. The third established part of a petition, the list of signatures, obviously comes after the creation and dissemination of the text, but the lists are present on petitions already circulating. We the People provides the initials, location, and number of each signature, while MoveOn Petitions provides the names, locations, number, and (if entered) a statement of support from each signee.

**Rhetorical Guidance.** Accompanying these seemingly innocuous empty text boxes is a variety of hints and suggestions that give petitioners specific rhetorical advice. These hints pertain to a variety of aspects of the petition, including the content and modes of argument used in the main written part of the text, the particular audience the petition will be aimed at, and the rhetorical appeals meant to increase the rhetorical velocity, thereby heightening the text’s chances for higher levels of digital circulation. This is an important aspect of these online petitions, because as I discussed in Chapter Two, digital circulation is an integral process for online petitions and is a huge aspect of the genre itself; thus, it seems appropriate that the guidance provided by these templates would actively encourage rhetorical moves that may increase the possibilities of digital circulation.
Figure 6: Hints and tips for We the People, from left to right, starting with creating headlines, then writing descriptions, choosing categories, and finally, composing keywords

**We The People**

*Brevity and Clarity.* From the beginning of the creation process, We the People encourages users to be succinct in their pleas and arguments: not only are there character limits on both text boxes, but the instructions for writing both the headline and description of the petition emphasize keeping the text “brief and compelling” or “brief” (top of Fig. 6, above). The instructions on the template also focus on clarity of intent and statement, as well as appropriate grammar and mechanics. All of these suggestions aim to produce a text that is accessible by a wide variety of people, and is simple to understand, and are certainly helpful tips for petitioners who wish for their petitions to reach a wide circle of distribution and circulation.

*Classification Strategies.* During her very first step, the user is asked to categorize her petition by choosing three issues to describe her petition; these issues range from
“Agriculture” to “Women’s Issues” (bottom left of Fig. 6, above). By forcing the user to tag her petition at the very start of her creative process, the website’s template is assisting the petitioner in conceptualizing her concerns according to a certain label, which will presumably influence the rest of her composition process. After she fills out her main headline and selects the issues she finds most in alignment with her plea, the site searches for similar petitions (based on the keywords in the headline and the categories she chooses). If there are petitions that the website deems similar, they appear during Step 2, and the petitioner is given the chance to sign one of those petitions instead of or in addition to creating her own petition, explaining that “Duplicate petitions on the same topic will result in fewer signatures for each petition” and “Focusing your efforts on signing a petition that already has signatures increases the likelihood that you’ll get a response from the Obama Administration.” This process has two possible outcomes: a petitioner might find a petition that is similar to hers and she may decide to sign that petition instead and forward it onto her own circle, or the other petitions may not be similar enough so she will continue with her own, but she continues knowing that there are other members of the public dealing with similar issues.

A petitioner is asked to engage in classification work for her petition once again in the third step, where she must compose keywords that “will help further define the issues in the petition, and will make it easier for others to find it.” The instructions suggest short key phrases (2-4 words in length) and no more than five key phrases in total (bottom right of Fig. 6, above). This encourages users to continue thinking about their issues in concise ways that will also connect to other users of the site by forcing them to think of keywords that others would be using and searching—a process that may increase digital circulation for a larger body of texts.

*Modes of Persuasion.* The suggestions for writing the description of the petition focus on structures of argument and persuasion. Not only do they recommend clarity and brevity, but the pop-up box recommends the user to: “Start by clearly articulating a position, and then include additional information or research” (Fig 6, top right). This step of We the People illustrates the site’s focus on creating a text that is accessible and logical in nature, preferably with additional research or information to back up a position. This suggestion of research also shapes a user of the template to do extra research (if they
have not done so already) to be better acquainted with their topic, and therefore more able to explain it clearly in this format. This suggestion is also one that may increase avenues and ranges of circulation, but also emphasizes the authority of logical and empirical reasoning—markers of critical-rational exchange.

**MoveOn Petitions**

![Figure 7: Hints and tips from MoveOn Petitions, from left to right, starting with writing titles, composing the main text, and finally, writing the background keywords](image)

*Figure 7: Hints and tips from MoveOn Petitions, from left to right, starting with writing titles, composing the main text, and finally, writing the background keywords*

**Brevity.** Like *We the People*, MoveOn Petition’s creation template stresses several times that a brief message is more likely to appeal to many different people. It states that the title should be brief, “like a newspaper headline;” that the main text of the petition “will get a lot more signers if your message is short and sweet—one or two sentences at the most;” and that the petition background should be 2-3 sentences long (Fig. 7 above). However, unlike *We the People*, these lengths are only suggestions, not character requirements, so users have the ability to ignore these limitations (and sometimes do, as will be shown in Chapter Four).

**Examples.** MoveOn Petition’s template also provides many examples for petitioners to imitate, if they wish. In addition to the explicit examples found under each tip, the text of the instructions also contain nods to genres that the users are probably familiar with; for example, referencing a newspaper headline to help users conceptualize what their petition title should sound and look like. These examples serve the template by showing the users what successful sections look like, which encourages users to follow in those steps. By providing information and examples of familiar genres, these templates guide users to use information they already have to compose in this potentially unfamiliar
genre, assisting them in the process while simultaneously shaping how users classify the
genre of the online petition.

**Persuasive Modes.** The creation templates for this site give explicit suggestions
on what to include in the written text of the petition and how it ought to be included. For
example, the template distinguishes between the main text and the background sections
of the petition, writing that the first is “NOT the place to make a detailed persuasive
argument for your position;” rather, this explanation should be placed in the background
of the petition, which is the section meant to be the longest (2-3 sentences). The prompt
for this section asks two questions that are meant to guide the petitioner to include
inherently persuasive information: “Is there a deadline?” and “Have you been *personally*
affected by the issues?” (Fig. 7, far right). This indirect advice to include information
about urgency and personal stakes is definitely a moment of encouragement to include
pathos-based appeals, a mode that would be more acceptable under a model like
communicative democracy, as described in the first chapter of this project. This nod to
rhetorical sensibilities is also present in the tips focused on selecting an audience for the
petition.

![Figure 8: Suggestions about choosing an audience for MoveOn Petitions, from left to
right: the White House or Congress, a state governor or legislature, or someone not in
these two prior categories keywords](image)

**Choosing a Target.** Step Two of the template process for this site asks the user to
select a target—the White House or Congress, one’s governor, or someone else—or all
three categories. After checking the box of one of the choices, another window with
information about the selected target appears (Fig. 8, above). For instance, if a user
selects The White House or Congress, the category is broken down into the House of
Representatives, the Senate, the President, or, a specific legislator. If a user selects Governor or State Legislature, the user must also enter in her state; however, for both state and national levels, users must fill in the names of their own legislators, as they are not provided by MoveOn. These two choices are standard, but the third option, falling under “Someone else (like a local official or corporate CEO)” features the most rhetorically centered advice. The window suggests picking someone “who actually has the power to solve the problem or make the change you want,” and if there is more than one person, to “focus on the person who is most likely influenced by public opinion.” Each of these suggestions aims to assist the petitioner in selecting the individual who is most susceptible to public opinion—for example, the template reminds users that elected officials are more likely to be persuaded by a petition than an appointed judge whose position does not rest on votes from his constituents.

Always central in this focus is the selection of a particular person, instead of an organization or group, due to the fact that a petition addressed to a single representative is more likely to get a response than one that is addressed to the entire Department of Justice, which could be avoided for quite some time. (Even if a petitioner chooses to address the entire Congress, the petition will be addressed to as many officials whose constituents signed the petition.) Additionally, each time the user has a chance to enter in her own text, the template advises her to check the spelling and use the person’s official title, emphasizing the creation of a professional document.

While the increasing number of options may appear to open up a user’s choices, these prompts actually serve as further guides for crafting a particular sort of petition that appeals to a specific audience, which will presumably make such a document more effective. These extra tips and hints, placed throughout the rigid creation templates, further emphasize the role that interfaces and templates have on the composition of digital texts. The suggestions on both We the People and MoveOn Petitions, which range from encouraging brevity to using personal experiences in the body of the petition, are meant to help petitioners create persuasive texts that will be highly shared via digital circulation. And thus these templates are actively shaping the new online genre of petitions.
Implications of Template and Homepage Analysis

The visual analysis of the homepages and creation processes of both We the People and MoveOn Petitions emphasizes the power that visual communication has in digital spaces. Both the homepages and the creation templates imply that the organizations behind these sites hold particular attitudes towards the process of petitioning and the system of democracy as a whole. Above all, these aspects of the organizations’ online presences emphasize the impact that digital technology can have on the understandings of the world around us, as well as the evolution of genres.

The homepages of We the People and MoveOn Petitions serve as the first step for users creating petitions that they wish to circulate amongst their communities—in order to access the creation tools on the site, users must visit the homepage first, and are therefore assumedly impacted by the ways that the sites are packing both their services, and their takes on democracy. As both sites frame their efforts as increasing levels or efforts to enact democracy, they serve as key sites of investigation for the ways that democracy is discussed and conceptualized on the web. Both homepages emphasize the importance of citizen input, and the potential for citizens to enact change in the democratic process, through both the visual and textual messages being transmitted. Most importantly, the juxtaposition of these different elements further emphasizes the type of interaction the sites are working to facilitate—users reading, signing, creating, and sharing these petitions. As Wysocki (2001) notes, “We should be asking, along with people in our classes, how the visual aspects of these texts work to compose us and how we go about composing pages and screens that encourage us to be responsible and critical readers” (p. 231). By reflecting on the images shown to and the composition processes that must be engaged in to create and share digital texts like online petitions, users can better understand how to utilize these texts and processes to their fullest potential, because they better understand the systems in which these texts are operating.

We the People focuses on the presence of the President’s office as the ultimate authority to which users are appealing, while MoveOn Petitions illustrates a more public-based approach to social change. As Barthes points out, not all of the visual elements necessarily hold connotations that determine the overall meaning of the image, rather, “there [is] always remaining in the discourse a certain denotation without which,
precisely, the discourse would not be possible” (p. 283). The text and images on the screen remind users of what these petitions are meant to accomplish, as well as overall messages about democracy and civic action. For We the People, the words laid across the image of the White House emphasize the idea that the White House is an office that every citizen has some sort of connection with, and for MoveOn Petitions, the text juxtaposed with the still image from the informational video reminds users that petitions are a tool of the collective public. Each site seems to attribute ultimate authority of the process to a different source—the government, or the people of the nation.

These attitudes are further perpetuated in the creation templates for each site. We the People’s hints and suggestions all focus on keeping the text brief, direct, and based on research—all modes of communication, which would fall under Long’s (2008) extended description of critical-rational discourse. This, combined with the explicit and implied linkages with the executive branch, suggests that the site has a more traditional, legalistic notion of democracy and democratic discourse. On the other hand, while MoveOn Petitions features some tips devoted to brevity, it also suggests the inclusion of explicit communicative democratic discourse, such as the use of rhetoric and narrative, both described by Young (1996). Asking users to explicitly address their subjectivities towards the issue meshes with Young’s (2000) advocacy of using rhetoric (which makes links to desires and situatedness apparent) and narrative as means of connecting with potentially different members of the same society: “We must share a description of the problem, share an idiom in which to express alternative proposals, share rules of evidence and prediction, and share normative principles which can serve as premises in our arguments about what ought to be done” (p. 72). By encouraging petitioners to be clear and concise, yet allow them to communicate via narrative and rhetoric, MoveOn Petitions seems to tap into communicative democratic principles, as outlined by Young. Though the model of communicative democracy does not entirely discredit previously privileged forms of discourse like critical-rational debate, the model does emphasize the proclivity of rational reasoning to exclude important voices in public conversations; therefore, a communicative approach to democratic discourse does open up avenues of discourse so that more citizens may partake, an approach that seems to go well with a model that focuses on the authority of the public.
This analysis of these sites, and their creation templates, implies that the sites have several ideological standings in regards to democratic interaction: a desire to encourage citizens to voice their concerns, a privileging of “reasonable” (Young, 2000) modes of communication, and an emphasis on having a particular goal and audience in mind. The homepages emphasize the models of each site, while the templates operate by creating a focused (if not particular) mode of communication. In addition, the hints and tips that urge users to keep their messages short and simple, and to use widely accepted norms of communication (“correct” spelling, no capital letters, and so on). These suggestions, combined with the aspects of the template that users must abide by—for example, the character limits on We the People—work to establish generic norms for online petitions, which include: the presence of a clear request and statement of motivation; the presence of a declared audience for the plea; short and succinct text; and the use of logically-organized arguments, narrative, and rhetoric.

For all the advice that these templates provide (which may be followed or not), it remains that the templates are limiting, in regards to interface, design, and genre. Users are guided through a particular experience in creating these texts, and do not get any opportunity to alter how their final petitions will appear visually on the Web. While this does, as I pointed out above, help to standardize the sites, there is also the potential that a site’s design constructs will not fit a petitioner’s message. As Fagerjord (2005) points out, “Layout styles, color schemes, and typography bring connotations with them” and “a prescribed design may invoke connotations (additional meanings) that do not align to the written text, or the design may set aside areas for text that are too small or too large.” Users must understand this when they choose a particular outlet for their petitions, and should look at examples of other petitions that have been posted to determine whether the site would display their petition in a way that fits their plea.

While we can view these templates as rigid, we must also remember that, “The main benefit of templates is that people who lack the skills to communicate effectively with computers can get the necessary confidence and head start to produce something they will be proud of” (Fagerjord, 2005). Both of these sites have creation templates for petitions so that more people are able to access the sites and create their own petitions without having to learn some other form of web-design. Ultimately, despite the
limitations presented by the templates, their presence most likely does contribute to the popularity of the form.

It is also important to remember the purposes of the sites, and how that may shape these digital markers of democratic assumption and rhetorical approach. For We the People, there are performance requirements set in place from the start, precluding a user’s ability to decide to what ends a petition may be used. A user cannot create a petition until they sign up and verify their account. Once they do so, they can create a petition, and must receive over 150 signatures before the petition is searchable on the site; the platform provides the URL and urges the user to share the petition via Facebook and Twitter to reach that “first threshold,” stating: “This is just the beginning! Right now only you know this unique URL. Share it with others to get more signatures on this petition. Until your petition reaches 150 signatures, it will not be publicly viewable on the Open Petitions section of We the People, so be sure to share this URL…” This presents a significant challenge for users of We the People—they must be able to distribute the text via their own digital networks at a high enough rate to reach those first 150 signatures before the petition can be found on the site through a search of keywords or title. So, for petitions on We the People, digital circulation is limited until this point in the petition’s process is reached, after which more avenues of circulation are opened up. If a petition reaches over 100,000 signatures in 30 days, a member of the Obama administration will respond to the call in a formal written statement. After that period of time passes, and if the threshold isn’t met, the petition is no longer listed as an “active” petition. Of course, a user presumably chooses this website knowing that she is aiming for an institutional response, but the presence of this pre-established goal does place restrictions on the ways the petition could be used. Notably, the existence of this system doesn’t mean that a user couldn’t circulate the petition with another goal in mind, but one might be drawn to another site with fewer restrictions and more options for potential outcomes—like MoveOn Petitions. The strict process may reflect the fact that there is an established end for the petition before it is even composed.

This analysis of these sites suggests that the composition, and delivery/circulation of these texts, “must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and
thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (Trimbur, 2000, p. 190). An examination of how online petitions are created and positioned on these two sites reveals that interfaces and templates are political—not necessarily in ways detrimental to democratic exchange, but they do function in particular ways that attempt to further the missions of the sites that feature them. Templates offer citizens interested in civic engagement through petitions accessible ways to engage in the process, but citizens should be cognizant of the fact that the templates not only shape, but ultimately determine, the final form of their compositions.

Carnegie (2009) argues that “…new media can use the interface to create interactivity to build a favorable relationship with the user so as to persuade the user to accept the messages contained within the content, to continue to use a particular site, or to perform certain actions. To examine the interface, we need to ask questions about the modes of interactivity” (pp. 171-172). It seems obvious that We the People and MoveOn Petitions work to establish relationships and connections with users by offering them the chance to have their voices heard; it is not so obvious that these sites are creating interactions with these users that may reinforce established ideas about appropriate democratic discourse. Regardless of intent, the creation processes of these two sites do offer easy and accessible modes of civic engagement.

Both the analyses of the homepages and the creation templates reveals that We the People and MoveOn Petitions have different ideas concerning their role in democracy, as well as how democracy functions; one places the power in the government and emphasizes critical-rational discourse, while the other stresses the role of the people and open-ended modes of communication, respectively—but both positions seem to communicate the same interest in inclusion and justice. In addition, it appears that the rhetorical suggestions made by the creation templates aim to create texts that can foster high levels of interest and digital circulation, and in turn, structure the genre of the online petition in particular ways that further support my claim that online petitions are their own genre. While this chapter explored the affordances and constraints of templates as an extension of digital culture, the next chapter will examine a small sample of petitions from these sites, in order to substantiate some of my claims about how these templates shape the final compositions, and how the texts embody notions of democracy.
CHAPTER FOUR:
ANALYSIS OF WE THE PEOPLE AND MOVEON PETITION TEXTS

The previous chapters of this project have recounted a vast amount of democratic theory, applying it to the distribution and circulation patterns of online petitions and the visual markers and creation templates of petition websites. This chapter aims to explore the actual texts of online petitions, in order to examine what sorts of assumptions these documents hold in regards to democratic communication, and even how the templates may affect the overall end product of the petitions. Hauser (2008) claims that, “by examining discourse we can uncover how society invests its rhetorical creations in cultural legitimations of self-generating activities by which it produces itself: the attempts of social actors to control values and norms, to overcome subjugation from dominant groups or institutions, and to appropriate and reappropriate their own historicity” (p. 116). Online petitions, which are used by a variety of people from a multitude of backgrounds in attempts to enact a change at local, regional, or national levels, are an example of discourse that is rhetorically created and exchanged. By examining some examples of this discourse, I hope to explore the cultural and political beliefs about democracy that can be found in these texts, to further flesh out the expectations and assumptions petitions from We the People and MoveOn Petitions seem to communicate.

MacNealy (1999) provides the motivations for scholars in different fields who engage in discourse analysis, including those in the field of rhetoric and composition. She writes that in recent years, “writing researchers have studied the discourses of certain communities, both modern and historical, to learn more about writing practices in those particular communities” (p. 127). Exploring this sample of petitions will provide examples of the assumptions that We the People and MoveOn Petitions make about democracy. Additionally, I hope that this work could also be a starting point for investigating the potential impact that these website interfaces have on the creation of online petitions.

Through an analysis of a small sample of petitions from each site, I hope to explore two different aspects of these documents. First, I attempt to determine if the modes of communication in these petitions are communicative or critical-rational in
nature. Stemming from the discussion of democracy and democratic modes of expression that I provided in the first chapter, I introduce and explain my categories for my analysis. To do this, I borrow the markers of Young’s (1996) communicative democracy (uses of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling), and the critical-rational modes as laid out by Long (2008), which include statement of position, appeal to overtly accepted truths, and use of facts. Of course, it is important to remember that Long’s work overall critiques the privileging of critical-rational discourse, as she notes, “The point is that in the effort to foster inclusive democratic practices, users of critical-rational discourse should not get to determine the rules of the game and who gets to play but, instead, expect to find their place along side the other perspectives and communicative styles at the table” (Long, p. 210). As such, this analysis does not privilege one style of discourse over another, but instead just aims to explore what modes are present in the sample; additionally, this analysis may find that the petitions in this sample feature markers of both styles of democratic discourse mentioned above, given Long’s point that these styles may find themselves at the same table. By investigating what markers of democratic discourse the petitions in this sample feature, I hope to outline some of the assumptions that these texts demonstrate about democratic discourse.

Second, I am interested in the potential impact of digital interfaces on these documents, given the visual analysis and in-depth discussion of the templates used to create online petitions put forth in Chapter Three. I wish to establish how closely the petitions in this sample follow the hints and tips provided for users when they create online petitions on both We the People and MoveOn Petitions. By determining whether the authors of the petitions in this study followed these suggestions for rhetorical strategies, I hope to come to some conclusion about the efforts of the sites in shaping this digital genre, and also accumulate a better understanding of the common features of online petitions.

We can use these findings to increase not only our understanding of the construction of the genre itself, but also the composition practices of those who choose to write and post online petitions, and potentially the beliefs and attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement that citizens bring to this form. “We need to know how [beliefs] condition and influence not only the written products composed within them but
the behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that ultimately produce those products, which in turn define the communities themselves” (Freed & Broadhead, 1987, p. 156). By examining the modes of democratic communication and the levels of adherence to creation templates established by We the People and MoveOn Petitions, I hope to provide information about the ways that democracy may be perceived and represented in digital environments. My findings ultimately suggest that the binary discussed in the first chapter between critical-rational discourse and communicative discourse may not be as clear cut in actual discourse as it is theoretically.

**Discourse Analysis as a Method of Investigation**

Though discourse analysis is often utilized in the field of linguistics to explore structural and grammatical features of texts, rhetoricians have used the method to explore the rhetorical and contextual components of discourse. Due to its systematic nature, discourse analysis can provide researchers with a variety of data about a certain topic or population that is perhaps more representative than findings from a process like close reading. “Studying discourse enables scholars to add to a body of knowledge in a particular discipline by making data-based inferences about the person[s] who created the discourse, the audience for the discourse, and the social and political context for the discourse…” (MacNealy, 1999, p. 124). Exploring the social and political context for online petitions is the goal of this chapter, which aims to examine the approaches to democracy and civic engagement suggested by these texts. Such an emphasis suggests that this discourse analysis is critical in nature, as it often “…involves going beyond a concern with the structure of language to consider a wide variety of features of language use, with an emphasis on the problems of treating texts as representational’ (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 21). Thus, the analysis that follows in this chapter concerns itself with the ideas and beliefs suggested by certain instances of language usage.

As a process, discourse analysis requires researchers to create a method of investigation that is repeated for each text in the sample, which includes establishing a systematic method of data collection as well as data selection, defining appropriate constructs of interest and categories, and recording and interpreting data. Presumably the researcher will find patterns (or a lack thereof) in the findings, which can then reveal
interesting qualities or characteristics of the texts and sometimes the authors of the texts. Despite its systematic nature, Griffin (2013) writes that, “…discourse analysis is not a unitary research method but one that takes different forms in different contexts, dependent upon the research one wishes to conduct, and within what academic discipline” (p. 97). Given the specificity of my research questions for this project, the discourse analysis that follows in this chapter does take a unique form, represented by the constructs of interest and categories that follow. I also want to emphasize that the findings from this analysis are not meant to be representative of all online petitions, or even all online petitions from these two specific sites; rather, I only wish for this analysis to illustrate how democratic discourse and characteristics suggested by templates appear in the sample, which can provide valuable information about the possibilities of these sites and the genre itself.

**Research Assumptions**

Obviously, websites aimed at encouraging citizens to compose and circulate petitions as efforts to enact social change do communicate messages about democracy and civic engagement. In the previous chapter, I performed a visual analysis informed by Barthes (1964) and Wysocki (2003) of the homepages and creation templates for both We the People and MoveOn Petitions. Given the instructions and attitudes portrayed through these aspects of the sites, I assume that the petitions from MoveOn will feature more markers of communicative democracy, specifically instances of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling as described by Young (1996), as I suggested in Chapter Three after reviewing the templates. I expect there to be several petitions that feature moments of narrative, as the site specifically prompts users to put their personal experiences and relate their individual investments with the issue into the text. On the other hand, I predict that the petitions from We the People will have more characteristics related to critical-rational discourse—statement of position, reliance on widely accepted truths, and the use of facts as evidence, all markers discussed by Long (2008). Though each site’s homepage and creation process suggest approaches of both communicative and critical-rational discourse, the suggestions on each template do more heavily advocate one discursive
system over another, so I expect the frequency counts of these markers to reflect my hypothesis above.

I do, however, anticipate the use of rhetoric, defined by Young (1996) as instances of communication that “announce the situatedness of communication” (p. 130), across petitions from both sites. Hauser and Benoit-Barne (2002) argue that despite the typical lack of recognition attributed to rhetoric as a communicative tool in a democratic context, rhetoric is actually key to how democracy and civil society function. Further, rhetorical exchanges are what provide citizens with opportunities to build relationships, connections, and a greater understanding of issues at hand. Since online petitions are meant to accumulate as much support as possible, often from a wide variety of people, rhetoric is a helpful strategy for online petitioners to utilize.

In regard to the form of the online petitions, it can be assumed that texts composed through a standardized process, such as the templates found on these two sites, are significantly shaped by said templates. Generally, users follow the instructions for filling in each text box or checking off boxes with categories. However, these sites also feature drop-down hints and tips that instruct the user to keep their headlines brief and direct, or to communicate a sense of urgency within the body of the petition. Because these moments of rhetorical advice are positioned as suggestions, and not requirements, I would like to evaluate the online petitions in this sample to determine whether or not the users seem to be following these suggestions, in order to suggest whether these tips, in addition to the mandatory aspects of the templates themselves, are rhetorically shaping these texts.

I predict that the petitions from both We the People and MoveOn Petitions will appear to have largely taken into account the suggestions and hints offered by each site, which address the brevity and content of the headline; the use of evidence (whether situational or empirical); and the establishment of a clear objective in the body of the text. I also hypothesize that the petitions from MoveOn.org will feature more instances of storytelling as a mode of communication, since one of the rhetorical suggestions during the creation process explicitly tells petitioners to describe their personal stake in the issue.
Methodology

The following section will outline the methodology used for these analyses, including a description of the collection and selection of data, the constructs of interest and categories, and coding procedures.

Data Collection and Selection

Petitions for the sample in this analysis are collected from We the People and MoveOn Petitions, the same sites that have been referenced throughout this project. Once again, these sites are particularly suited to questions about democracy that have been pursued throughout the course of this thesis, given the explicit positioning of both websites as hubs of democratic interaction and potential democratic intervention.

On each site, there are thousands of petitions that could have been selected for this analysis. Rather than narrowing the sample to focus in on one particular issue (for example, by searching “gun control” or “education” on each site’s search function) and selecting petitions within those parameters, choosing petitions from the site as a whole is a more fitting method for answering the questions that this project poses about attitudes and assumptions towards democracy. Additionally, I have chosen to only look at petitions that have remained open and that users may still sign, so that no assumptions can be made about the connections between modes of communication and success of that particular petition that could come up if closed petitions that already received a response were in the sample.

On both sites, there are two ways that the petitions are indexed: by date posted (displayed in reverse chronological order) and by current number of signatures (displayed from highest number of signatures to least number of signatures). In order to get a more accurate picture of the features of these petitions as they have been produced in a more expansive period of time than the last several weeks (as new petitions are added every day), I chose to select the sample petitions from the index that orders the petitions according to the number of signatures. Though the petitions in this sample have all been deemed as “popular” or “hot” according to each site’s standards, it is important to note that this analysis does not seek to link causality between numbers of signatures and the characteristics of the petitions. Instead, I am merely trying to find what sort of democratic

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15 The titles and full text of the petitions can be found in the Appendix.
communication is taking place, and whether the selected petitions appear to have taken suggestions from the template creation process into account. Additionally, I feel that this method is best to control against having several petitions about the same topic (an outcome more likely if petitions are being selected from a pool of texts created only within the last week or so), since petitions about the same event are perhaps more likely to include similar appeals, which would potentially skew my data counts.

Once the list of petitions on each site, arranged according to number of signatures in descending order, was brought up, I selected five petitions from each site—the first, fifth, tenth, fifteenth, and twentieth on the list. I spaced them out at this rate to ensure that I would get a wider range of signature levels: the petition with the most at 211,148 signatures (Petition W1 from We the People, “Declare Muslim Brotherhood organization as a terrorist group”), and with the least, 398 signatures (Petition M5 from MoveOn Petitions, “Wildfires on public land: Causes, Costs and Prevention”). In addition to varying levels of support, these petitions feature a wide range of topics, including: environmental issues like the declining population of bees, fracking in North Carolina, oil drilling presumed to cause earthquakes in Colorado, and the prevention of wildfires; concerns with government corruption, such as suspicious deals between members of the legislative branch and private companies and potential overreach in the criminal justice system; foreign affairs issues that include diplomatic relationships and homeland security; economic concerns with limitations on free market processes; and finally, demands for the FDA to legalize certain treatments. Also, these petitions address local, regional, and national audiences, providing a diverse sample of texts.

Of course, 10 total petitions from both MoveOn Petitions and We the People, sites that host thousands of individual petitions, make up a small sample of the texts that are posted and circulated on these sites each day. However, due to the constraints of this project and the nature of my research questions, a random sampling of active and circulated petitions during the last year provides a representative picture of the general characteristics of these texts.

**Segments for Analysis and Recording Units**

For the analysis concerned with assumptions of democracy, only the body of the petitions will be examined—this excludes the headline (or title). Due to the large amount
of text that is included in this sample, I decided to establish the recording units as grammatical sentences. Therefore, each sentence is coded into one subcategory alone, ensuring that no subcategory is weighted more heavily than another.

The examination of the level of adherence to the suggestions and tips offered by the websites during the creation process will look at both the headlines (or titles), as well as the body of each petition, since particular instructions are provided regarding both parts of the text16.

**Constructs of Interest**

As noted above, this analysis is concerned with two separate issues: the assumptions about democracy conveyed in the texts, and the level of adherence to suggestions put forth during the creation process present in the posted version of the petitions. Therefore, I have two designated constructs of interest: “modes of democratic communication” and “adherence to creation instructions.” The “modes of democratic communication” refer to strategies that embody either critical-rational or communicative discourse, and are meant to reveal what sorts of expectations and ideas about democracy are manifesting in these texts. Units that embody these strategies will be numerically counted. “Adherence to creation instructions” refers to whether or not the petition in the sample features the characteristics emphasized by the hints and tips for creation presented to users during the creation process on MoveOn Petitions and We the People. These results will be recorded as affirmative or negative. Though these constructs deal with two separate issues and I evaluate them in two different ways, they have both been identified as topics of interest due to the information they may reveal about the assumptions and forms of online petitions.

**Categories and Coding**

In this chapter, I perform three separate analyses—the first of which is categorical in nature, and the latter two are simply recorded according to whether the text contains a particular feature or not.

The first analysis, meant to examine the approach to democratic communication taken in these texts, is structured according to a conceptual division between critical-

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16 We the People petitions contain a headline and a body, while MoveOn petitions feature a title, the main body of the petition, and background information.
rational and communicative modes of exchange. Critical-rational discussion privileges logical modes of expression, and presents this study with three subcategories, borrowed from Long’s (2008) work: general, socially accepted truth; presented facts; and reasoned positions. For this study, “truth” refers to nods to or mentions of widely held beliefs in American society (i.e., hard work is necessary for honest success). “Facts” refers to statements of detailed information presented directly in a text\(^\text{17}\), and can take the form of research, statistics, or quotes from outside sources. For example, Petition M4, “Shut Down Earthquake Causing Injection Wells in Colorado,” features a unit that states: “Whereas: The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Act charges the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission with ‘protection of public health, safety, and welfare’ (34-60-102).” To further clarify between these subcategories, I differentiate between “truth” and “facts” in coding by classifying “truth” statements as sentences that gesture to a general, societally supported belief, while statements of “fact” are unique to the situation outlined in the petition. “Positions” refers to a clear presentation of a petitioner’s overall goal in crafting the text. Each of these subcategories falls under the larger umbrella of critical-rational discourse.

Modes of communicative democratic interaction include greeting, rhetoric, and narrative, all terms and definitions that are borrowed from Young’s (1996) work. “Greeting” refers to a moment in the text that does not necessarily hold great meaning for the communicative exchange, but instead indicate the beginning or end of a conversation, as well as “forms of speech that often lubricate ongoing discussion with mild forms of flattery, stroking of egos, and deference” (p. 129). One example of a “mild form” of deference would be the use of “please,” which does surface in several samples in this study. Young’s definition of “rhetoric” is slightly less defined than Aristotle’s tropes of ethos, pathos, and logos, instead relying on the concept of styling of speech. More specifically, she focuses on situatedness, or the construction of the occasion, speaker, and audience, as well as the link to desire, which is how rhetoric gets and keeps attention. “Humor, wordplay, images, and figures of speech embody and color the arguments,\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^{17}\) “Fact”, in this context, is defined as a statement that is positioned as a fact; it does not necessarily have to stand true in reality, but it does have to be presented as fact in the examined discourse. This study is more concerned with persuasive and communication strategies than accuracy of the content in these texts.
“storytelling” refers to the act of sharing narratives of personal involvement with an issue. These subcategories all contribute to a model of communicative democracy.

Initially, I went through the 10 petitions in this sample and classified each sentence as either a critical-rational or communicative mode. However, during my process of coding according to this first established rationale, I found that some sentences could be classified as both “communicative” and “critical-rational.” For example, many times the statement of a petition’s position in these samples also constructed the purpose of the speech or established urgency, falling under Young’s (1996) definition of rhetoric. Since I had established that sentences were the segments of analysis for this project, I could not count them twice in the overall numbers and still retain an accurate study. As MacNealy (1999) cautions, “If you find you have overlapping categories, then you may need to create additional ones to help reduce this confusion” (p. 133). Thus, I returned to my established categories and created a new matrix, which features categories that allow a unit to potentially be classified as both communicative and critical-rational in nature:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical-rational Modes</th>
<th>Communicative Modes</th>
<th>Combination Modes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>Position + Greeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Position + Rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Position + Storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>Truth + Greeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Truth + Rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Truth + Storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Facts + Greeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facts + Rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facts + Storytelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9: Modes of Discourse by Category*

Though this move to create combined subcategories of critical-rational and communicative tropes may seem counterintuitive, especially given the theoretical dichotomy established between critical-rational and communicative democratic approaches, it is important to remember that language is complex, and has the potential to capture different meanings with small segments of text. Additionally, this re-categorization falls under the goals and aims of discourse analysis: “Thus, the task of
discourse analysis is not to apply categories to participants’ talk, but rather to identify the ways in which participants themselves actively construct and employ categories in their talk” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 29). This re-categorization represents an attempt to identify the ways that petitioners are actually utilizing democratic communication in as accurate a fashion as possible. Finally, this new matrix references the notion discussed in Chapter One that there is not a pure model of democracy; that is, each actively functioning system has processes and parts taken from different theoretical leanings, and so it makes sense that these online petitions may illustrate that reality. A matrix that acknowledges this allows for a more nuanced and potentially more accurate reading of the sorts of assumptions that these petitions are communicating.\footnote{The combination subcategories will be counted as their own; for example, units that fall under the “position+rhetoric” subcategory will be counted just once, as a combination mode. They will not be combined with the critical-rational or communicative categories during calculations.}

The second analysis, interested in the level of adherence to rhetorically driven suggestions and tips offered by the creation templates of the sites, involves two data sets. A distinction between MoveOn Petitions and We the People’s petitions must be made in this analysis, because each site has suggestions unique to itself. For instance, MoveOn Petitions urges petitioners to answer the question, “Have you been personally affected by the issue?” and to provide this information in the body of the petition. We the People’s creation process offers no such advice, and so, to evaluate one site’s petitions according to the standards or suggestions of the other site would not produce any meaningful data. Additionally, it would not answer one of the questions that this project is interested in pursuing: Do these petitions follow suggestions from the websites for a document with increased rhetorical effectiveness?

To that end, each table used for analysis in this section is personalized according to the suggestions of each site. During coding, each feature will be checked off as present or not present.

We The People:

- Is the headline brief (newspaper headline length)?
- Is the goal of the petition in the headline?
- Does the headline have correct spelling and avoid the use of slang?
• Does the body of the petition start with the position of the text?
• Is this initial comment followed up by additional information or research\(^{19}\)?

MoveOn Petitions:
• Is the title brief (newspaper headline length)?
• Are there only 1-2 sentences in the main part of the petition?
• Is the petition addressed to a specific human being?
• Are there only 2-3 sentences in the background portion of the petition?
• Does the petition communicate that a deadline is nigh, so immediate action is necessary?
• Does the petitioner insert a moment about how the issue has personally affected her?

Each of these questions can be answered as “yes” or “no” for each of the petitions, and so the data will be viewable according to petition and to the petitions from each site as a whole.

**Data Results**

As explained above, there are three sets of data to come out of these analyses: one set concerned with exploring the approaches to democratic discourse displayed by these petitions, and the other two illustrating whether the petitioners who composed the petitions in this sample followed the hints and tips for composition on We the People and MoveOn Petitions. For all data sets, W1-W5 correspond to the petitions from We the People, while M1-M5 refer to the MoveOn petitions\(^{20}\). The data presented below is the raw count (each unit as a sentence) of discursive modes and are weighted equally.

\(^{19}\) Additional information does not necessarily have to be research backed up by cited sources, though We the People encourages such a rhetorical move.

\(^{20}\) Again, titles and the full text of each petition are available in the Appendix.
Table 1: Modes of Democratic Communication—Overall Frequency Count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>W1</th>
<th>W2</th>
<th>W3</th>
<th>W4</th>
<th>W5</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
<th>M4</th>
<th>M5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position (P)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth (T)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts (F)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting (G)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric (R)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling (S)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + R</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + R</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + R</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates that out of the entire sample (petitions from both sites), the subcategories with the highest counts were: “rhetoric” (23), “facts” (18), “position + rhetoric” (10) and “position” (8). “Truth,” “position + storytelling,” “truth + greeting,” “truth + storytelling,” and “fact + storytelling” each had 0 units.

Table 2: Modes of Democratic Communication—by Subcategory and Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>We the People</th>
<th>MoveOn Petitions</th>
<th>Total in Subcategory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position (P)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth (T)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts (F)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting (G)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric (R)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling (S)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + R</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + R</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + R</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F + S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Units</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 2, the counts for each mode of democratic communication are broken down according to subcategory and website. We the People petitions contained fewer total units than MoveOn Petitions (28 compared to 47), but I have presented the data according to website so as not to misrepresent the proportions of subcategories. Additionally, it appears that individual subcategories of “facts,” “rhetoric,” and “position + rhetoric” were prominent for both sites.

Table 3: Modes of Democratic Communication—by Overall Category and Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>We the People</th>
<th>MoveOn Petitions</th>
<th>Both Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical-Rational Units</td>
<td>7 (25.0%)</td>
<td>19 (40.4%)</td>
<td>26 (34.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative Units</td>
<td>12 (42.9%)</td>
<td>13 (27.7%)</td>
<td>25 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination Units</td>
<td>9 (32.1%)</td>
<td>14 (29.8%)</td>
<td>23 (30.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Units</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47*</td>
<td>75**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total Unit count for MoveOn Petitions is 47, due to the one “Incomplete” unit in the table above.
**Total Unit count for both sites is 75, due to the one “Incomplete” unit in the table above.

Table 3 represents the proportions of discourse categories for each website, which were calculated with the raw counts from each category and site. Again, given the discrepancy in the total number of units for each site (only 28 for We the People and 47 for MoveOn Petitions), I have provided the percentages for each site, as well as both sites combined, so that it is clear that the higher number of overall units from MoveOn Petitions may affect the percentages for the entire sample.

Table 4: Adherence to Creation Instruction—We the People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>W1</th>
<th>W2</th>
<th>W3</th>
<th>W4</th>
<th>W5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief Headline</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal in Headline</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct Spelling, etc.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start with Position</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow with Research</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 illustrates that each petition from We the People followed the prompts of the creation template to keep the headline brief and to feature the goal of the petition in the headline. The other suggestions were followed to a lesser extent.

Table 5: Adherence to Creation Instruction—MoveOn Petitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
<th>M4</th>
<th>M5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief Title</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 Sentences in Body</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressed to Human</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 Sentences in Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of Deadline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Mention of Personal Connection</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above, Table 5 shows that the only suggestion that each petition in the sample adhered to was that the title be brief. The other suggestions were not followed consistently.

Additionally, Petition M4, “Shut Down Earthquake Causing Injection Wells in Colorado” followed the majority of suggestions made by MoveOn’s templates (featuring five out of six features suggested).

Discussion

After the analysis was completed and the data collected, I found that of my three major assumptions (petitions would be largely communicative or critical-rational in nature depending on the site they were created and circulated on, rhetoric would be used across petitions, and petitions would abide by the suggestions put forth by the templates), two were disproved.

Rather than the individual petitions from We the People being easily categorized as critical-rational, and those from MoveOn Petitions representing communicative democracy, the petitions in this sample appear to have traits of both critical-rational and communicative democratic exchange. And instead of featuring many characteristics
suggested by the creation templates of each site, it appears that the petitions in this sample largely did not enact the rhetorical strategies suggested. However, rhetoric was one of the communicative strategies used among petitions from both sites, a finding that suggests the importance of such a tool in democratic discourse and supports the idea of Hauser’s (2008) rhetorical public sphere.

**Modes of Democratic Communication**

As noted above, my assumption going into this analysis was that the petitions from We the People and MoveOn Petitions would feature more traits of critical-rational discourse and communicative exchange respectively, given my conclusion in the previous chapter that We the People seemed to encourage a more critical-rational image of democracy, while MoveOn Petitions seemed more open in its accepted range of discourse, mimicking a communicative understanding of democratic exchange. However, the calculations of the evenly-weighted categories has revealed that, proportionally, the opposite is true: 25.0% of the units in We the People’s petitions are critical-rational in nature, while 42.9% of the units are communicative—thus, the majority of the units in the We the People petitions are communicative in nature. The results for MoveOn Petitions were also unexpected; just 27.7% of units from MoveOn’s petitions embody the communicative modes of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling, as 40.4% are classified as critical-rational. The remaining units for both sites fall into the combination category, which features subcategories that allow single units to be classified as both communicative and critical-rational. 32.1% of units from We the People’s petitions and 29.8% from MoveOn Petitions’ texts fall into this category—significant numbers in light of the original assumptions of this project that did not even anticipate such an outcome.

There are several possible reasons that the results of the discourse analysis in this chapter do not reflect the assumptions forwarded by each site in Chapter Three. My analysis of the homepages and creation templates in the previous chapter led me to suggest that petitions from each site would forward that particular site’s apparent ideologies; however, I did note that both sites feature elements of both styles of discourse. Perhaps the discourse analysis is further evidence of the prevalence of varied styles of discourse in both of these online petition sites. The unexpected addition of the combination category of modes may also have shifted the data results, as units classified
as combination modes were not counted as wholly critical-rational or communicative. Additionally, it is also important to consider the fact that petitions are public texts, composed for a particular purpose in a specific kairotic moment (as discussed in Chapter Two), which means that the subject matter of the petitions, as well as their intended audience, timing, and creator, are all variables that could influence the style of democratic discourse utilized.

While these figures do reveal that the original hypothesis of this analysis has been disproved, a more in-depth discussion of the subcategories that were prevalent (and those that were nearly invisible) during coding will provide more specific insight into how these petitions are utilizing and viewing democracy.

**Prevalent mode markers.** Several communicative modes were utilized more often than the other modes in this sample, both of single modes, including “rhetoric,” “fact,” and “position,” and combination modes, such as “position + rhetoric” and “fact + rhetoric.”

**Single Modes.**

**Rhetoric.** Out of 75 total units, which are grammatical sentences, 22 are classified as uses of rhetoric, communicating the situatedness of a scenario via time or position, as defined by Young (1996). This percentage (29.3%) represents the largest portion of units in this sample, suggesting that rhetoric is the most often utilized mode of democratic communication in this subset of online petitions. This finding matches up with the initial assumptions of this analysis, and support Hauser’s (2008) notion discussed in the first chapter, that rhetorical exchanges are an important part of democratic exchange in the public sphere. One example of the use of rhetoric comes from Petition M5 from MoveOn Petitions, “Wildfires on public land: Causes, Costs, and Prevention.” The petition states, “Wildfire season has arrived!” and later, “Wildfire prevention needs to start today!” These short sentences work to both establish the timeliness of the plea through emphasizing the value of prevention, and to keep the audience’s attention with the use of exclamation points.

**Facts.** Nearly a quarter, or 24%, of units fell into the subcategory of “fact” (18/75). This suggests that petitioners from this sample are aware that in order to convince a wide variety of people that come into contact with their petition, they must
use statements of detailed information, typically concerning the situation outlined in the petition. The use of facts, which are privileged over emotion in critical-rational discourse (Long, 2008), communicates a message of universality and accuracy to the reader. Many petitions mention dates, or cite research backing up their positions. For example, Petition W5, “Remove United States District Attorney Carmen Ortiz from office for overreach in the case of Aaron Swartz” contains a link to a *New York Times* article about the situation, which classifies as a statement of fact for this project.

**Positions.** Although the frequency of units that explicitly communicate their position is lower than the amount that rhetoric and facts are used, 10.7% of all units used in this sample are considered to be forthright statements of position. This finding makes sense in that all petitions have historically been expected to include three main parts: the position, the reasoning, and the list of signatures (Heerma van Voss, 2001, p.6). Since online petitions are short texts, there is a limited amount of space and time to communicate the main ideas in the petition; thus a clear statement of position would be an important tool in garnering support.

**Combination Modes.**

*Position + Rhetoric.* 13.3% of all units are classified as establishing a position on the issue, while also utilizing rhetoric to communicate either a connection with the audience or to keep the audience entertained. In such a short text (many with word counts resting between 800 and 1200 words, total), communicating a position while also utilizing rhetoric is a potentially effective strategy. One example of a unit from this sample comes from Petition M2 on MoveOn Petitions. The last line states, “Sign the petition: Stop North Carolina’s sweetheart deal to the fracking industry, by urging the state legislature to reject SB 786.” By stating the objective of the petition, while implicating the unsavory motivations of the state government through the use of the phrase “sweetheart deal,” this petitioner utilizes two modes of democratic communication in one unit.

*Fact + Rhetoric.* This combination seems counter-intuitive, but there were indeed 6 sentences that fell into this category, making up 8.0% of the total units. Though the two terms may seem to be opposites, they can, in fact, work simultaneously in persuasive texts. For example, Petition W3 from We the People, “Provide necessary assistance to
prevent Taiwanese people from being murdered by Philippines and rebuild friendship” addresses President Obama in hopes of gaining diplomatic support for Taiwan. “It is sad to hear that a 65-year-old unarmed Taiwanese fisherman was killed by Philippine coastguard on May 9th.” While this death is presented through a fact indicated by specific details about the situation in this petition, the petitioner also inserts emotion and thus “invokes…specific meanings” (Young, 1996, p. 130), connecting the audience to the cause. As I established in my discussion of the subcategories for this analysis, the “fact” mode of discourse entails mentions of details, events, or other information directly related to the situation in the petition and may be backed by research. As shown in the example above, specific information about an issue can coincide with rhetorical messages aimed to orient the audience to the world of the text.

**Scarce mode markers, and silences.** Several modes occurred very rarely, and several (especially in the combination category) were never found at all in this sample.

*Greeting.* Given that a petition is addressed to a particular entity, the element of greeting would seem to be important in such a text. However, the creation template of We the People reminds petitioners that they are by default appealing to the Obama Administration, so there is no specified place to put a greeting. MoveOn Petitions features a series of text boxes that petitioners can use to put the name and title of who they are petitioning, but again, it does not encourage a moment for “greeting” anyone, just a constant awareness of the intended target. It is possible that these established text boxes negate the need to place a greeting in the body of the text in the petitioner’s eyes, which would explain such a low count. However, one petition in the sample, Petition W3 from We the People, contains both “Dear Mr. President,” and “Sincerely,” which both count as greetings, according to Young’s (1996) rationale that includes statements of acknowledgement and leave-taking.

*Storytelling.* Also under the communicative mode, storytelling did not have very high frequency in this sample. Only one unit was classified as an instance of only storytelling, and just 2 units were classified in the combination mode (as “Fact + Storytelling”). This finding is particularly surprising because of the presumed emotional

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21 “Fact + Storytelling” is a mode unique from “Fact” because storytelling implies a personal connection to and an intimate knowledge of a situation.
connection that many petitioners have with their topics, as well as the fact that MoveOn Petitions specifically prompts their users to write in the background of the petition about their personal connection to the topic during the creation process. A lack of this mode of communication suggests that petitioners are perhaps more drawn to logical and general reasoning for their claims.

“Truth.” There were a total of 0 units classified as statements availing to widely accepted truths, though each of the other singular modes had at least one unit classified as such. Additionally, with the combination modes featuring “Truth” as one part, only 3 units were recorded (all within “Truth and Rhetoric”). This count can be interpreted in two possible ways: first, it could be assumed that “Truth” statements are not overtly used in these documents; however, this seems to me too radical of a conclusion with a lack of evidence.

It could also be taken to mean that appeals to overall truths very rarely exist in isolated circumstances. That is, in order for a larger societal truth to be evoked through discourse, that truth has to be described in some way—in this case, perhaps with rhetoric. For example, Petition W5 from We the People states: “A prosecutor who does not understand proportionality and who regularly uses the threat of unjust and overreaching charges to extort plea bargains from defendants regardless of their guilt is a danger to the life and liberty of anyone who might cross her path.” This statement evokes a larger truth about a commonly accepted notion of democracy—that all citizens, regardless of the status of criminal proceedings against them, have the right to “life and liberty” under the law, and an authority figure that threatens these rights is a negative force for citizen rights. Additionally, this statement cannot be classified as just a statement of truth, as the sentence clearly works to vilify the prosecutor in question through characterization evoked by the words “threat” and “danger”—an instance of rhetoric, as described by Young (1996, p. 130). Perhaps “truth” is an example of critical-rational discourse that works most effectively when paired with other modes of communication.

Combinations. Though units that are combinations of communicative and critical-rational discourse make up a significant portion of the overall percentages with this analysis, there are several subcategories that zero units fell into, including: “Position + Storytelling,” “Truth + Greeting,” “Truth + Storytelling,” and “Fact + Greeting.” Since
“Truth,” “Storytelling,” and “Greeting” are all markers found scarce on their own, the fact that combinations feature these modes is not surprising. However, though these counts all came in at zero, it is important to remember that this is just one analysis with a limited number of samples, and does not mean that these combination modes fail to exist in the overall body of texts.

In summation, the numbers illustrate that overall the style of democratic communication with the highest frequency in this sample is critical-rational discourse, with 34.7% of all units falling under this category, though 33.3% of all units are categorized as communicative and 30.1% are classified as combinations. So, each style of communication makes up about a third of the entire body of units, suggesting that the styles are evenly distributed among the sample. Additionally, We the People’s petitions contain more communicative units (42.9%) than any other, while the style with the highest frequency for MoveOn Petitions texts is critical-rational (40.4%). The outcomes of this count, the presence of the combination category of discourse, and the occurrence of different modes of democratic exchange in single petitions all suggest that democratic discourse in practice is perhaps not so easily classified as “critical-rational” or “communicative.” Instead, it appears that with the online petitions in this sample, modes of communication that fall under either of these approaches are often used together in these texts, making them dynamic and potentially effective over a wide population. Further, the petitions in this sample appear to be forms of democratic discourse that are open enough for petitioners to customize them for their purposes and approaches to enacting change; that is, just because a site appears to emphasize a particular model of democracy does not mean that the online petitions on the site will mimic those beliefs. Rather, though some aspects of the sites may influence petitioners, petitioners will ultimately communicate via modes they deem most appropriate for the situation.

Adherence to Template Suggestions

As noted above, the assumption that the petitions in this sample would reflect the hints and suggestions offered by the websites during the creation process is disproved by the data reflected in the latter two analyses. Instead, it appears that with both We the People and MoveOn Petitions, the petitioners heeded only suggestions regarding the length and focus of the titles. The other hints and tips, which are more rhetorical in
nature, seemed to be utilized at lower levels. None of the petitions in the sample met every single criteria established by the suggestions on the site, though several completed the majority of them.

**Titles.** While We the People features two separate instructions for crafting a headline of a petition (keep the headline brief, mention the goal of the petition in the headline) and MoveOn Petitions only advise petitioners to keep the title brief (the site offers the advice that, “Your title should be brief, like a newspaper headline.”), all 10 petitions featured brief and clear titles. Though it is impossible to conclude that the hints or tips are what led petitioners to have brief titles (perhaps these petitioners brought a working knowledge of the genre to the composition process to begin with), it is clear that these standards are being met on both sites.

**Length.** Each site handles the issue of length in a different way. We the People’s platform limits petitioners to 120 characters for the petition headline, and 800 characters for the body of the petition. In contrast, MoveOn Petition’s text boxes on its creation pages do not feature a text limit, so there are two separate suggestions concerning length: for the main body of the petition, 1-2 sentences, and for the background section, 2-3 sentences. While We the People’s creation process doesn’t offer any suggestions about length (as mandatory length limits are placed on the user), MoveOn Petitions does—and petitioners in this sample did not heed the advice (none of the five petitions met the length requirements of both the body and the background sections, though two met just the body and one met just the background quota). For example, Petition M1, “Save Bees from a Highly Toxic Pesticide” contains four sentences in the main body of the text and 12 sentences in the background section; Petition M3, “Demand an investigation of the GOP’s jobs-for-resignation scheme” contains three sentences in the main body and five sentences in the background portion. This higher number of sentences suggests that the petitioners have much to say about these topics and feel that more information and persuasion is needed than what they could fit in 2-3 sentences. Additionally, these counts are not outrageously higher than the suggested lengths, which suggests that petitioners may be trying to heed the advice—they just cannot distill their thoughts any further.

**Rhetorical suggestions.** Perhaps the most interesting suggestions brought up by the hints and tips shown during the creation process for both sites are those that
encourage particular rhetorical moves, presumably meant to make the petitions more appealing to audiences to ultimately secure more signatures via wider digital circulation. On We the People, these include advice aimed at: ensuring that spelling and grammar is accurate, starting the petition with a statement of the overall position, and following that initial statement with research or more information. Four out of the five We the People petitions did follow up their initial stance with ‘research,’” whether it was additional information or links to outside news sources (as in Petition W5, “Remove United States District Attorney Carmen Ortiz from office for overreach in the case of Aaron Swartz”). Though the use of “facts” was of more concern in the prior analysis in this chapter, the use of research is undoubtedly a utilization of fact.

The hints on MoveOn Petitions, along with the length suggestions noted above, include mentioning a deadline for action and a personal connection to the issue. As discussed in Chapter Three, both of these suggestions line up with the concepts of rhetoric and storytelling, as laid out by Young (1996), and given the explicit suggestion to insert some of this information, it was expected that the MoveOn petitions would unanimously contain these features. However, only two of the five petitions mentioned a deadline or communicated a sense of urgency, while three contained some sort of reference to personal connection. However, only one petition, Petition M4, “Shut Down Earthquake Causing Injection Wells in Colorado” explicitly contained first-person pronouns, stating that, “I live in Greeley Colorado. We had an earthquake last night…” None of the other petitions used “I” or “we” at all, suggesting the belief that a more general approach may be more persuasive to wide audiences, or a focus on personal connection may be less convincing than a general appeal.

One incredibly interesting outcome of this analysis on MoveOn Petitions’ texts concerns the advice to address a petition to a live human being, rather than an organization. For each option (federal and state houses of legislation, the president, a state governor, or another entity), the platform specifically prompts the petitioner to enter in a specific name, whether it is one’s state senator, or district representative. Here is an example of a prompt: “It’s best if you send your petition to a human being. For instance, it’s better to address your petition to Walmart CEO Lee Scott than Walmart the corporation.” Additionally, the platform suggests that a petitioner selects “the person who
is most likely to be influenced by public opinion” and advocates addressing the petition to someone whose job is subject to public opinion, such as an elected official. These suggestions are presumably meant to help petitioners find the most likely avenue for change. However, only one petition in this sample followed that advice, though it seems incredibly pertinent. Perhaps one way that the site could encourage users to follow this advice more closely would be to offer some sort of assistance in finding the appropriate person. As I pointed out in the third chapter, users are encouraged to enter in the name of their representative or other individual of interest, but warned to use the person’s official title and spell the name correctly, demonstrating that the site is not responsible for such errors.

Overall, it appears as if petitioners will use the templates to create their petitions in the ways that they want to, and so will not necessarily heed the suggestions and advice put forth by the platform, if they are not required to do so. Despite the attempts of We the People and MoveOn Petitions to provide sound rhetorical guidance so that petitioners who use their sites to compose and circulate texts via their sites gain as much rhetorical velocity and opportunities for amplification (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) as possible, it appears that users will use platforms in ways that they desire, if they are given the capacity to do so.

**Implications of the Analyses**

The analyses described and explained above focus on the messages about democracy that are communicated through the texts of these online petitions, as well as the impact that suggestions from the creation templates may have on the final texts in this sample.

I determined that the beliefs and approaches to democracy represented through the petitions in this sample are complex and varied in nature. Rather than being able to classify a petition as critical-rational or communicative in nature, the texts themselves contained a variety of modes of communication, ranging from communicative storytelling to critical-rational statements of fact. Additionally, some individual units could not be classified as purely communicative or critical-rational in nature, which necessitated the addition of a “combination” category during the coding process. This
development suggests that perhaps the two modes of democratic exchange are not as theoretically distinct as previously suggested in this study. Though critical-rational exchange does carry with it the undeniable connotations of elitism and exclusion, as Johnstone (2002) points out with the comment that, “In the Western tradition, logic (or at least the appearance of logic) is often thought to be superior to other ways of persuading, and carefully crafted arguments in public forums often draw on the language and structure of formal, syllogistic reasoning” (p. 211), Young (1996) reminds us that a more inclusive, communicative model allows embodied, personal exchanges “in addition to critical argument” (p. 129). These findings support the notion that critical-rational modes of discourse can work in tandem with communicative exchange. Further, these results challenge the binary between critical-rational discourse and communicative discourse put forth in the first chapter—these categories are actually quite fluid and we can find many moments where these styles of discourse are working in tandem. As such, it is important to remember that theory does not always translate cleanly into reality.

It also seems important to keep in mind that what is considered to be persuasive is heavily dependent on the audience, and perhaps petitioners who utilize these sites are cognizant of this fact and so craft petitions so that they appeal to as many different members of the public as possible—by using varied methods of democratic communication, from both a critical-rational and communicative approach, petitioners may be working to utilize the most effective modes of communication from each school of thought. Additionally, we could perhaps see these diverse texts as representative of the different ideas that petitioners have about democracy, and how it works. Perhaps, as many theorists suggest (Rai, 2010; Cintron, 2010; Lyon, 2013), actual democracy does in fact work as a result of many different ideas from many different theories.

There were also some rhetorical moves within these samples that seem to be important, but there were no markers in this study to describe them accurately, or figure them more heavily into the data. These included the use of quotes from government documents, as well as hyperlinks to stories about the content of the petition. They were coded as “fact” statements, since they were detailed mentions of information related to the situation at hand, but I feel that the use of outside sources is also inherently rhetorical, most likely as a way to increase a sense of ethos. The ability to link users to other
websites that may further emphasize the points in these petitions is a particular affordance of an online petition, as it is made even easier for members of the audience to find more information about the issues brought up by the petitions, and potentially fosters the expansion of networks for digital circulation.

Though the discourse analysis in this chapter sought to distinguish critical-rational from communicative modes of discourse, thereby classifying the subcategories as distinctly one style over the other, I would like to offer up the possibility that these categories are perhaps too rigid—a suggestion supported by the very existence of the combination categories in the analysis. Given that each of the petitions in this sample demonstrated a mixture of communicative styles, it seems logical to suggest that a varied approach to democratic communication is an approach that is already being practiced, and is subsequently being met with some success (in regards to the fact that these petitions have been circulated and are visible on their respective hosting sites). As noted above, a mixture of democratic styles can contribute to the application of these texts in a variety of contexts, and for a variety of audiences, both on a singular level and a mass level. In Chapter Two, I claimed that one of the major markers of online petitions as their own genre was the necessity of digital circulation as a means to increase publicity and possibly assist in the formation of publics. Here, I would like to suggest that the process of digital circulation is intimately connected to the styles of democratic discourse featured in these texts, as the discourse circulates and gains power as it does so. Perhaps meshing these modes of democratic discourse together is a strategy meant to “amplify” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) the text’s range and span so that it may circulate more widely.

The second and third analyses of this chapter explored the features that most likely surface across the genre, as evidenced by this small sample of petitions. Chapter Three discussed the creation templates of these sites and suggested that the templates potentially have a profound impact on the final form of the petitions, and my analysis in this chapter revealed that the required aspects of the templates, such as the inclusion of certain parts and keeping to certain lengths, are followed and therefore are apparent in the final forms; on the other hand, the suggestions put forth in the template did not have as large an impact in this sample—even though the advice being offered is meant to help users craft a rhetorically-savvy piece that can accumulate high levels of digital
circulation. Again, though this is a small sample and does not fully represent all petitions across all websites, or even the two sites in this study, these findings do suggest that though the creation templates are actively encouraging particular traits that may increase rhetorical velocity and subsequent levels of digital circulation, these efforts are not necessarily successful. This supports my claim that online petitions are a malleable and versatile form of public writing, and emphasizes the fact that they cannot be easily defined through the presence of textual features alone.

By examining the actual texts of these online petitions, I hope that I have explored one manifestation of citizen belief concerning democratic ideals. After all, the creation and circulation of online petitions on these sites is a social activity intimately linked to the institution of democracy. “There is no institution unless it is enacted and reenacted moment-by-moment in activities like water-cooler gossip sessions, corridor politics, meetings, and numerous other sorts of social interactions, all of which partly (but only partly) have a life all of their own apart from larger cultural and institutional forces” (Gee, 1999, p. 1). Online petitions are significant documents in our contemporary society because they are actively reflecting, constructing, and communicating ideals about modern democracy. The ideals include the importance of high levels of access and circulation, which ideally promote higher levels of inclusion and subsequently, just circumstances.

These analyses have illustrated that the enactment of democratic communication is complex and multifaceted in reality, and that citizens will utilize tools available to them in ways that they deem fit. The conclusion that critical-rational and communicative discourse work together in reality picks up the theoretical discussion of both these theories of democracy found in Chapter One, as well as extends the exploration of the relations between these digital spaces and democracy in Chapter Three. Additionally, the further investigation of the rhetorical strategies that manifest in these texts provides more information about the ways that these texts may accumulate momentum during the process of digital circulation, subsequently heightening levels of publicity and assisting in the formation of publics discussed in Chapter Two. In the final chapter, I will discuss the assumptions about democratic communication that seem apparent through the previous analyses of the functions, websites, and texts of online petitions. I will also suggest that
the complexities of the genre potentially require a reassessment of the genre itself. Finally, I will discuss what implications these findings may have on the field of rhetoric and composition, in regards to theories of civic participation, future research, and pedagogical practices.
CHAPTER FIVE:
IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Online petitions found on We the People and MoveOn Petitions are two representations of how members of the American citizenry engage with public issues via digital channels in the 21st century. Though petitioners come to these sites for a variety of problems and concerns, they each seem to place their faith in the act of collectively petitioning authority, a form of civic action that dates back to the pre-colonial era in the United States (Mark, 1998). They choose to petition higher authorities through the use of these websites, suggesting both a comfort with digital engagement and a confidence in these forums’ abilities to garner support and ultimately draw attention to their causes.

This thesis project has addressed several aspects of this digital public genre, including democratic models, digital circulation, creation templates, and texts of petitions themselves, in order to study how this new mode of public discourse contributes to our notions of democratic engagement. At the start of the final chapter, I want to return to this project’s main research questions: What assumptions may online petitions from We the People and MoveOn Petitions be making about democracy? How does technology contribute to the form and function of this digital genre? And finally, what does this mean for the field of rhetoric and composition?

The first two questions have been explored throughout the last several chapters, which have looked at the assumptions that online petitions seem to make about democracy, as well as the rhetorical and functional features of the genre. In Chapter One, I discussed the complexities raised by democratic theory, and identified some tropes of communication commonly associated with two main styles of democratic discourse: critical-rational, as described by Habermas (1989), and further explained and complicated by Long (2008); and communicative (Young, 1996). I also suggested that communicative discourse was a more inclusive approach to democratic discourse than critical-rational debate, which privileges certain modes of expression that are only available to certain groups. Chapter Two focused on the genre of the online petition, starting from a “genre as social action” perspective (Miller, 1984), but complicated the notion of the online petition genre by emphasizing the impact that digital circulation, and the aspect of “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolo & DeVoss, 2009) has on the form. The process of digital
circulation, which has significant effects on the texts including their relationship to democracy, is one of the key functional aspects of the genre. In the third chapter, I wrote that the hints and suggestions present through the creation processes on both sites are meant to help petitioners create documents that are rhetorical in nature and will garner higher levels of circulation, increasing levels of civic participation with and as a result of these sites. Chapter Three also contained a visual analysis (theoretically based in the work of Wysocki, 2003, and Barthes, 1964) of the homepages and creation processes of We the People and MoveOn Petitions, which suggested that We the People’s interface encourages its petitioners to use critical-rational modes of communication, while MoveOn Petitions appears to emphasize a more communicative style of democratic exchange. The modes of democratic exchange that fall under critical-rational debate and communicative interaction (statement of position, indication of accepted truth, and usage of factual information; and uses of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling, respectively) were examined in more depth through Chapter Four’s discourse analysis of a small sample of petitions from both sites. Though I anticipated that the petitions would reflect each site’s democratic styles of communication that I had determined in Chapter Three, the analysis revealed that the petitions in the sample displayed a combination of both critical-rational and communicative modes of exchange. My analysis in this chapter also evaluated the sample for the frequency of features suggested by the hints placed throughout each site’s creation process, finding that hints advocating particular rhetorical features (such as mentions of time) were not heeded. This finding suggests that petitioners will shape the genre in ways they find useful and will not necessarily heed all advice found in templates. Though online petitions have evolved from a print form with a lengthy cultural and social history, their online form seems to have introduced even more opportunities and complexities with regards to democracy and civic engagement.

I have several goals for this final chapter. First, I wish to explain that my findings illustrate that online petitions reflect a variety of assumptions about democracy and democratic communication, making them complex documents that are potentially effective in a variety of situations and appealing to a multitude of audiences. Second, I want to suggest that we reconsider classifying genre through intended social action alone, and instead reflect on the potential for classifying digital genres in ways that take into
account the effects of technological construction and circulation. Third, I would like to outline some of the affordances and constraints of using these particular sites for citizens interested in social change. Finally, I plan to examine the implications of how rhetoric is being taught with online petitions, and explain why this genre is of particular interest to scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition—as researchers, teachers, and citizens. Ultimately, I believe online petitions illustrate that new technology can provide citizens with expanded opportunities for civic engagement and democratic exchange that are largely malleable to their individual styles, interests, and causes.

**Varied Assumptions About the Democratic Process**

Historically in the United States, as Mark (1998) explains, petitions have been used as a way to engage with the government by a variety of people from different classes and statuses. “Consistent with the political changes wrought by the Revolution and the Constitution, petitions praying for remedies for the more general grievances ceased to be a vehicle whereby both the enfranchised and the disenfranchised were entitled to the ear of and consideration by the government” (p. 2160). Petitions are inherently political texts. They seek to enact some sort of social or political change, by voicing the collective support of a community in a tangible way to the group or individual in charge. This project has revealed that online petitions can utilize a variety of democratic modes of communication, from seemingly very different theoretical approaches. Additionally, the widespread acceptance of this process, as suggested by the large number of citizens who create, circulate, and sign these documents, illustrates the public’s open-minded attitude towards civic engagement and activism through digital means. These varied democratic methods of communication and the popularity of these sites suggest the potential for new or updated modes of civic exchange to actively “deepen democracy” (Young, 2000) through expanded opportunities for deliberation.  

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22 While online petitions themselves are not designed to be overwhelmingly deliberative spaces, they do offer some opportunities for discussion via the format (as mentioned in Chapter Three). Also, the presence of online petitions indicates that there are other texts and discussions occurring about the issue at hand; thus, online petitions are representative of deliberation occurring in other spaces.
I began this project anticipating that We the People and MoveOn Petitions, as political entities themselves, would emphasize particular models of democracy through their homepages and creation templates. In Chapter Three, I concluded that though both sites encouraged participation across issues and backgrounds via their homepages, their creation templates communicated slightly different theoretically bents to democratic discourse: We the People overtly beckoned to norms of critical-rational discourse, while features of MoveOn Petitions’s creation process encouraged characteristics suggestive of communicative democracy, such as the inclusion of narrative. Chapter Four began with the assumption that the petitions created on each site would reflect these particular models. However, the discourse analysis revealed that, as a body, the petitions from both sites neither overwhelmingly represented one mode of democratic discourse over another, but instead featured moments from both critical-rational and communicative styles of exchange. Additionally, a significant proportion of units actually fell into a category that represented critical-rational discourse combined with communicative exchange. These findings suggest that in actuality, online petitions do not lean heavily on one sort of political communication over another, and instead, utilize moments from different traditions of communication—perhaps from more than just the two focused on in this study.

At first, this finding seems perplexing—how can two styles of discourse, that are radically different in tone and approach, be found in the same documents? Further, these communication styles are linked to the two models of democracy discussed in the first chapter—deliberative and communicative. Young (2000) defines deliberative democracy as “primarily a discussion of problems, conflicts, and claims of need or interest. Through dialogue others test and challenge these proposals and arguments…Participants arrive at a decision…by determining which proposals the collective agrees are supported by the best reasons” (p. 23). While this is a discourse-based model of democracy, where citizens are encouraged to discuss issues of shared concern, certain modes of exchange are privileged because many forms of deliberative democracy assume that argument, unity, face-to-face discussion, and a standard of norms are all markers of a working system. Such a system also operates under the premise that the decision that the majority agrees upon for the good of all is just, and that reason and the bracketing of differences rule the
deliberations leading up to such a decision; further, “deliberation is competition” (Young, 1996, p. 123). Offering a revised model, communicative democracy…

…includes more than deliberative democracy, because it recognizes that when a political dialogue aims at solving collective problems, it justly requires a plurality of perspectives, speaking styles, and ways of expressing the particularity of social situation as well as the general applicability of principles. (Young, 1996, p. 132)

So, communicative democracy is a model that does not preclude the use of reason and logic, but at the same time actively acknowledges the fact that people hold views according to their social status and background, and oftentimes the only way to communicate those realities are through less subjective means of expression. Further, this approach seems to work better with online petitions, as texts that represent the gathering of publics around issues of interest, rather than publics gathering in a space and then deciding what issues are important enough to discuss so as to disinterestedly decide upon a course of action (as in Habermas’ model). Such an understanding also fits with Hauser’s model of the rhetorical public sphere, which allows a variety of communicative styles (2008).

This combination of different forms of political communication supports the discussion in Chapter One that frames democracy as a complicated system that, in reality, often functions as a blend of different theoretical approaches—oftentimes, approaches that seem to be incompatible. The concurrent use of position, truth, and factual statements with moments of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling may seem to be contradictory if we are looking at these modes in the simplest of categorizations as critical-rational or communicative; however, these combinations actually signify that petitioners that use these sites are attempting to reach out to as many audience-members as possible by creating rhetorically diverse texts. It is important to remember that communicative democracy, as described by Young (1996, 2000) does not discount the importance of “reasonable” or logical structures of communication, but instead advocates for a more inclusive definition of political communication that allows a number of different strategies in discourse. Therefore, it seems that online petitions are one form of democratic exchange that, through their utilization of a variety of communicative tropes, encapsulate the sort of exchange that ideally occur in a communicative democracy. As
such, these texts have a better chance at being circulated among wide audiences, because they are emotionally and conceptually accessible to larger numbers of an intended audience because of their clarity and rhetorical flavor. These sites are actively encouraging their users to compose for re-distribution, or, as discussed in Chapter Two, “amplification” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009).

Though communicative democracy allows for the use of both objective and subjective exchanges, the exclusion and privilege implied by critical-rational modes of discourse provides some cognitive dissonance when categorized as part of the discursive modes available to citizens engaging in the petitioning process. So, I would like to offer up the possibility that there are aspects of critical-rational discourse that can assist democratic communication in a fair and just manner. Of the three modes used in this study that were borrowed from Long’s (2008) work, which overall critiqued critical-rational discourse, “fact” seemed to be the strategy most commonly used in the petitions in the sample for the discourse analysis. As discussed in Chapter Four, facts refer to statements of detailed information presented directly in a text, and can take the form of research, statistics, or quotes from outside sources. Though it seems that facts are a requirement for any sort of public discourse, they can be considered critical-rational in nature if they are positioned as superior to other modes of communication. In a communicative setting, facts just have to be used in ways that do not preclude the introduction of, for example, narrative, into the discussion. “Position” also seems to be a helpful strategy, as it refers to the clear statement of a goal or aim in conversation, and so is a helpful addition to a communicative toolkit. Finally, “truth” seems to be the most exclusionary of the critical-rational modes discussed in this study, because its use rests upon dominant societal understandings and beliefs; as such, this mode is not particularly inclusive. So, facts, in careful contexts, and position statements are two elements that may be helpful in communicative democratic exchange.

The suggestion that online petitions are designed to not only persuade, but to be circulated amongst wider audiences than the original petitioner could have reached herself, is also important to this discussion of democracy. Both of these sites emphasize the importance of users sharing and re-sharing links to petitions that others have created, so that the petitions have the chance to go “viral.” Through these processes, the text has
the potential to gain greater levels of “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009), which increase its span of circulation (as well as its ability to be re-appropriated and shared in unexpected ways). The process of digital circulation increases the levels of publicity that these texts experience. Informed by Warner (2002) and Ryder (2011) in Chapter Two, I argued that circulation obviously increases the value of the document in the eyes of the person or group being petitioned, but also assists in identifying and forming publics. The formation of these publics, based around issues and texts (Warner, 2006; Hauser, 2008) allows these groups to become involved with causes, which are often more expansive than an online petition. As Ryder (2011) points out, circulation is an important consideration for composers working for social change. “The challenge of public-formation, then, is to understand how broadly the public discourse needs to circulate (what it will take to empower the capacity of that public) and to understand what channels one can use or create for that circulation” (p. 99). The sites that host online petitions seem to be functioning as channels that allow citizens to navigate this issue. By creating digital spaces for citizens to become civically engaged, and to promote activist causes, websites like We the People and MoveOn Petitions illustrate the idea that democracy is an imperfect and constantly-fluctuating system that requires the input of concerned citizens.

Democracy is more than just a governing system that allows citizens to watch over the powers of those in charge; “It is also a means of collective problem-solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of society” (Young, 2000, p. 6). Online petitions are one form of collective problem solving available to members of the public, which can be used to increase levels of justice in modern America. For Young (2000), justice refers to “the institutionalized conditions that make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decision-making, and to express their feelings, experience, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen” (p. 91). Sites like We the People and MoveOn Petitions are representative of efforts undertaken that do encourage citizens to use their skills and participate in public discussions. While evidence of attempts at increasing justice can be seen with these online petitioning sites, the other marker of Young’s (2000) deepened democracy,
inclusion, is more complicated in this situation. Inclusion, according to Young (2000), requires that all individuals and groups affected by a decision are both cognizant of the discussions around the issue and have their voices heard and honestly acknowledged by others. While the accessibility and uniformity of the sites examined in this study suggest that increasing numbers of people would have a chance to engage with and use the sites, and that online petitions present far fewer barriers for participation than traditional forms, there could be higher levels of inclusion for situations where online petitions are being used, in two main ways. First, there are many groups that do not have access to these sites, and to the literacies and skills required to use these sites—a situation that Young (2000) would classify as external exclusion, since citizens cannot find their way into the discourse. Second, the creation and circulation of an online petition does not guarantee that the person being petitioned will heed, or even acknowledge, the concerns and requests raised by the petitioners. This failure could be attributed to a number of different reasons, including the possibility that petitioners would be using communicative tactics unfamiliar to those in charge; as a result, these claims and ideas would be dismissed, which would be a form of internal exclusion in Young’s (2000) system. Thus, while online petitions can be viewed as a means of deepening democracy, they are not the ultimate solution for issues of privilege and exclusion.

While this project has illustrated that We the People and MoveOn Petitions, as well as the petitions that are hosted on these sites, portray a variety of different assumptions towards democracy in several different communicative modes, it is important to note that these findings are specific to these sites. Though they may reflect larger understandings of the democratic process that are perhaps shared by many members of the public, online petitions are one form of democratic exchange in a very large arena of democratic discourse. Additionally, the term “democracy” is wrought with many different connotations. Rai (2010) reminds us that “Democracy is ‘ethnographically emergent’ because the indeterminate meanings of democratic topoi can only be understood within the concrete contexts within which they are evoked” (p. 43). Thus, at their core, online petitions are incredibly situational in nature, and illustrate the importance of an inclusive approach to democratic exchange—so that all groups with a
stake in public concerns may have a voice, through a method that is comfortable for them.

**Classification of Genre Beyond Social Action**

In Chapter Two, I suggested that the most productive way to initially identify online petitions as a genre is through Miller’s (1984) genre-as-social-action theory. She designates genre as “a classification based in rhetorical practice and consequently open rather than closed and organized around situated actions” (p. 155). Even though we might recognize a genre through its structural form, that form is determined by the rhetorical purpose of the genre; this relationship implies that the intended social action, or purpose, of the text is the most important classifying factor for genre. While this approach fits well with any form of public writing, since the ultimate purpose of a text is typically stated within the text of the document, this simple definition would consider traditional print petitions and digital online petitions to be the same genre. However, I maintain that online petitions are their own distinct genre, for one main reason: the processes of digital distribution and circulation create many different outcomes and opportunities for online texts that are not possible solely as a result of print petitions, and potentially determine some of the motivations for and outcomes of using the digital form.

Traditional print petitions function in the following way: the petitioner crafts the document and gathers signatures from other members of the community, then submits the petition with accompanying signatures to the person or group in charge. In this way, petitions have two audiences, and two objectives; the petition must appeal to both the members of the community to gain signatures, and the person who will eventually grant the request so that she is convinced that the course of action laid out is a good idea. Members of the community either sign it or refuse and move on. However, online petitions have a more extensive process of circulation, one that often does not follow such a direct path as described above. Petitioners who wish to use an established website to create and circulate their petitions have a variety of choices from the beginning of their process. After choosing a site, they then create the petition using a series of templates that are unique to each site. As established in Chapters Three and Four, We the People and MoveOn Petitions’s sites each shape their petitions in particular ways and position
sharing options in different ways (and presumably other sites, such as The Petition Site and Change.org, do so as well). The original petitioner has the option to just leave their petition on the site, or to share it via social media or email. However, the role of the original petitioner is not nearly as important with digital petitions as it is to print petitions. The difference is that most of the “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) for the text comes from circulation, rather than initial distribution. Though Ridolfo and DeVoss discuss rhetorical velocity in regards to texts being changed for positive or negative results, I feel that rhetorical velocity is a term that can be applied to a discussion of how texts are shared; so with online petitions, whether they are shared via social media, or email, and so on. After the creator shares it on her social media or sends it to her personal contacts, the success of the text then relies on the actions of secondary signers to the petition, for them to distribute it among their followers, and so on. The petitions can also be found through the main website’s search function, and if a petition gets a lot of support, it can be put on the home page of the site, which draws even more traffic. Social media options for sharing promoted by these sites include Facebook, Twitter, GooglePlus, and personal websites. The complexity of this circulation process, and the resulting expanded opportunities for petitions, necessitate that we find new ways to go beyond social action as the defining standard of genre. Additionally, the use of interactive templates to compose these texts could also be an avenue for exploration in regards to genre designation, due to the potential impact that these interfaces have on the final versions of the texts.

After all, Miller writes that, “genres change, evolve, and decay; the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society” (p. 163). As genres shift and transform over time, they have the potential to form in radically different ways and for different purposes. This is the case with online petitions. Though it is closely related to its print predecessor, online petitions are a uniquely digital genre; that is, many of their qualities, their affordances and constraints, are a direct result of their digital quality. Warnick (2012) claims that, “Rhetorical critics should adapt their methods to the study of rhetoric in new communication environments” (p. 65). Given these considerations, I would like to propose further consideration a new system of genre classification for digital texts that
takes into account modes of dissemination, modes of creation (like the templates discussed in this study), and perhaps other variables—all in addition to social action.

**Affordances and Constraints of Online Petitions**

Just as online petitions have arguably formed a new, unique genre, thereby destabilizing the methods we use to classify and categorize genre, these documents have also found themselves at a point of intersection between democracy, technology, and civic participation. This intersection has provided many interesting outcomes for public writing in digital spaces, which has resulted in a number of affordances and constraints in usage for online petitions. These potential benefits and drawbacks, which mainly pertain to matters of circulation and audience, are discussed below.

**Affordances**

**Increased ease for transmission and circulation.** While it is obvious that using the Internet to distribute and circulate information and texts is more convenient in many respects than more traditional methods, I want to expand on how much easier transmission is online. (Of course, this only applies for those with access to technology as well as the literacies to use these technologies.) By using the Internet, an already established and networked communication system, to share online petitions, petitioners reap the benefits of several facts of networked life: less time to transmit information, the ability to send information across great distances with ease and in a timely or instant fashion, and the large numbers of individuals who do have access to the Web. A user can compose a digital petition and send a link to it via email in less than a minute—to someone across the country, or even across the world. The capability for this process to form groups of interest has been discussed in studies of other forms of protest, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement’s use of Twitter, which “…demonstrates how the digital circulation of texts (which includes links, photos, and video in addition to prose) allows protestors to very quickly build a geographically dispersed, networked counterpublic that can articulate a critique of power outside of the parameters of mainstream” (Penney & Dadas, 2014, p. 88). Thus, the Internet’s infrastructure offers not previously available means of distribution—and persuasion, potentially altering how democratic discourse unfolds in the 21st century.
**Multitude of avenues for and heightened ease of creation.** Additionally, the development of multiple petition-hosting sites (and the connections made between these sites and forms of social media that users are already familiar with) provides petitioners with several options that are popular and designed for easy use. Citizens who wish to post and circulate an online petition have many choices when picking a site: We the People, MoveOn Petitions, Change.org, The Petition Site, iPetition, Petition Buzz, and Care2 are just several of many sites that are in existence specifically for users to post and circulate petitions. Other organizations, such as Salsa Labs, are generally interested in fueling efforts of civic engagement, but offer online petition hosting as part of their overall package. And as each of these sites exist as channels through which citizens can post and share online petitions, they each have tools that help users compose and share their petitions—including the templates discussed in Chapter Three, which may be rigid in nature, but ultimately exist as a way to increase the possibilities for citizen input. “The main benefit of templates is that people who lack the skills to communicate effectively with computers can get the necessary confidence and head start to produce something they will be proud of” (Fagerjord, 2005). I view this focus on effective communication and understanding as a direct link to Young’s (1996) notion of communicative democracy, which necessitates that all citizens have a way to express themselves effectively and authentically. The accessibility of the sites and the presence of information and advice in creating and using online petitions provide citizens with more established venues through which to approach their causes.

**Opportunities for different avenues of pressure.** In addition to the ease with which these online petitions can be distributed, their public digital presence also exposes them to outside forces, potentially forces with no stake in the movement—including the news media. Major news organizations often feature stories about an online petition that has mobilized passionate citizens and has encouraged some change—often before the request in the petition has actually been granted, suggesting that the informal pressure exerted by the media on the petitionee has had some effect on the granting of the request. Clearly garnering traditional media attention could be considered “a rhetorical objective”

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23 Of course, these sites cater to different groups and are appropriate for different circumstances, so that plays a part in the choices of users.
(Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012, p. 96) with online petitions, given the ease with which they circulate and can be accessed. After all, calls from reporters and news coverage exert a different sort of pressure on institutions than the presentation of the petition itself. As the end of Chapter Two discussed, petition sites are very aware of this potential for use, and use it to their advantage.

**Constraints**

**Accusations of “slacktivism” and potential loss of immediate nature.** Critics feel that by positioning online petitions as a form of activism, citizens become complacent and stay behind their computers, rather than getting involved in the physical world. Gurak & Logie (2003) claim that Web protests are weak, especially if they invoke more traditional genres, writing that, “companies and governments alike take electric correspondence, including electronic petitions, with a grain of salt” (p. 26)\(^{24}\). O’Connor (2012) specifically targets online petitions, claiming that “the fear with online petitions is that many people think just signing is enough; once you’ve filled out your name and email address you’re done.” Another concern with online petitions is that even if one gains a lot of support from the public, there is a large possibility that the person or group being addressed will never see the petition, or will fail to acknowledge it—a possibility discussed earlier in this chapter in light of Young’s (2000) definition of external exclusion. The digital, though versatile in use and nature, can sometimes serve as a shield or screen between those interacting, and online petitions do present this risk for users because of the lack of face-to-face contact.

**Complications for locally based causes.** Along with the possibility for expanded localities and ranges for causes through digital petitions comes the realization that the range available for users of online petitions could undermine a locally focused movement. For instance, if someone creates an online petition advocating for a particular service in a small town, what value does an online petition provide? That is, why would it matter if someone from three states away could see and sign the petition? And beyond

\(^{24}\) Of course, in 2003, there were fewer outlets for social media and such sites were not as popular or powerful as they are now, which may contribute to Gurak and Logie’s argument.
that, would it possibly harm the cause, if people outside of the community of stakeholders began to interfere with these documents by voicing their support?

Perhaps signatures from outside the locality could harm a cause—or perhaps those who see and sign the petition from outside the community could be seen as other concerned citizens standing in solidarity. (Though, it is important to note that many petitions require users to put their zip code or address, which is used in classifying local causes.) Additionally, several studies suggest that online participation can foster real-life engagement in communities (Grabill, 2003; Mesch & Talmud, 2010), implying that perhaps online petitions could serve as texts that initiate passionate, in-person events. However, this ambiguity further emphasizes that rhetors should evaluate the affordances and constraints for particular modes of civic participation before deciding on their specific methods.

Possible limitations of form and use. Finally, in light of the sometimes-strict guidelines that each site puts into place for users, online petitions are documents that have prescribed channels of creation and use. Creation templates, discussed in Chapter Three, guide the composition of these documents. And, of course, once a petitioner uses a particular site to compose and host her petition, it is a part of that site and will be developed according to that site’s procedures. For example, because We the People’s purpose is to allow citizens a direct link to the Obama administration, a user presumably would not use that site to create and circulate a petition meant for a privately held company. And with MoveOn Petitions, which often pursues causes that begin with a petition and progress into other modes or protest, the petition is most likely not the action that will enact the desired change; that is, the petition serves as a starting point for a larger cause. While these sites and systems all have rules and norms of usage, users still have the ability to circumvent some of these requirements. Chapter Four’s findings suggests that that even if rhetorical advice is available and visible to users, they will not necessarily take it into account as they craft their petitions. So, even if guidelines about length and content on these petition sites are relatively strict (We the People, in particular, comes to mind), petitioners can still find ways to make these texts their own—if that just means a refusal to construct a text that follows all of the site’s suggestions, or if it means “irreverently” composing a facetious petition that critiques aspects of society
that aren’t realistically able to be altered with a petition (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009). The malleability of these texts, even though they result from ideologically and structurally rigid templates, contributes to their capacity for varied uses, further emphasizing the importance of rhetorical velocity to the form. In order to navigate the space between the templates and the potential uses of the genre, petitioners must carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks that come along with using each site.

While these criticisms do bring up valid concerns, such as the potential isolation of individuals from previously cohesive collective social movements and an over-dependence on technology, the fact remains that many citizens feel comfortable, and even passionate, about engaging with their communities through digital means. In all, the opportunities that online circulation provides users of digital petition illustrate that the digital has truly crafted a genre that can be used in a variety of capacities—especially in light of encouraging civic engagement, or contributing both interest and ideas to discussions about public concerns, and including various members of various communities through digital means.

**How Digital Texts Are Teaching Democracy and Rhetoric: Why It Matters to Us**

As rhetorical scholars and compositionists, digital writing, often classified as public writing as well, is a matter of great concern for our lives as scholars, teachers, and citizens. Recent research has delved into a number of different forms, levels, and issues, and has focused on both pedagogical and theoretical ends. Ultimately, digital forms of writing are illustrating rhetoric in new ways and situations, and so it is integral to our field that we examine the ways that these digital texts are using (and teaching) rhetoric.

Because we find ourselves in a time of great technological change, obviously the amount of research on digital texts has increased in recent years; topics range from general New Media Studies (Brooke, 2009; DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2012) to updated takes on the classical rhetorical canon of arrangement (Wysocki, 2001; Delagrange, 2009; Arola, 2010). While the avenues of research for digital spaces are myriad, I believe that the conversations occurring about the interplay between democracy and technology are particularly important (see Bazerman, 2002; Salter, 2003; Benkler, 2006; Feenberg, 2012). As this project has illustrated, online texts like petitions are using
particular tropes of democracy, and are a common way for citizens to interact with the government and also to participate in their communities. Bazerman (2002) writes that, “Rhetoricians…may be more effective in keeping open the possibilities of citizenship by noting the current opportunities for civic participation, the consequences of those forms of participation, and the protean shape of the several and evolving public spheres” (p. 34). Though keeping current is difficult with digital technology research, work that focuses on this important relationship between civic participation and “evolving public spheres” has the potential to shift established paradigms of citizenship and democracy.

Additionally, if there are new ways that the public is engaging with civic concerns, it is our responsibility as teachers of rhetoric and composition to be aware of these trends, so that we may help our students cultivate the skills needed to engage in public writing online. The “social turn” of rhetoric and composition (Welch, 2008) has illustrated that the field, as a whole, finds value in having students complete public writing assignments. By writing for real audiences and (ideally) having an exigence other than to convince the teacher of their claim, students learn that, “Effective public writing must account for the degree to which public writing exists in a historically textured sphere that is the product of innumerable social and political forces” (Weisser, 2002, p. 95). This fact is even more easily made real to students through digital texts—which are accessible from nearly anywhere, at any time. An increase in digital access, and the continuing development of sites that both provide citizens with information and encourage them to get involved via various means of participation, has provided teachers with opportunities to bring these conversations about democracy and civic engagement into classrooms with more immediacy. Thus, digital compositions such as webpages and social media posts have become commonplace public writing assignments. Having students compose in these forums allow them to become familiar with the ways that argument and rhetoric manifest in public documents. By asking them to analyze and then compose their own texts to place into circulation, students increase their functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies (Selber, 2004). By honing their skills in understanding how to use particular websites and services, critiquing and questioning the interfaces that assist them in doing so, and composing digital texts to enact a particular end, students are
actively archiving lessons and skills that they may use as citizens after they leave the university.

For example, teaching students about digital public writing by assigning online petitions as a supplement to a traditional research paper, as I did, provides them the opportunity to not only experience converting an academic piece of writing into a form meant for public consumption, but also the opportunity to navigate digital spaces meant to encourage civic engagement. They must explore the forums available to them, weighing the costs and benefits of each site, the restrictions and freedoms that each creation process allows, and the sorts of circulation options each site puts forth. Students must decipher the cultural messages illustrated by each site, and think about their overall desired end as they choose their petition-hosting site: Do they wish to receive a government response, to propel a larger social movement, or merely to raise awareness in their communities? They also have to compose their texts using these templates, anticipating the amplification and re-appropriation of their petitions across a variety of social media and traditional media outlets. Students also are able to compare their understandings of democracy and rhetoric that have been cultivated in the classroom with the ideas put forth by websites like We the People and MoveOn Petitions. And perhaps most importantly, it provides them with a hands-on experience in democratic theory—even if the terms “public formation” and “critical publicity” are not introduced in class discussion, students can take away knowledge of these processes through their experiences in fostering support for their causes.

As this project has detailed, a significant amount of the discourse present in online petitions falls under the communicative umbrella of exchange, which is more fluid in nature. That is, expressions of individual position, feeling, and emotion are allowed and even encouraged in public discussions. If this attitude toward civic exchange is on the increase, this could mean that rather than the positioning of logic and critical-rational discourse as the ultimate form of persuasion, vernacular, communicative exchanges could become the norm. Rice (2012) urges us to encourage a different approach to teaching our students public writing.

As rhetoricians and teachers, we can encourage new kinds of vernacular discursive habits that help to shape a different kind of public subject. Instead of
creating conditions that allow people to imagine themselves as exceptional public subjects of feeling who exist at a distance from crises, new discursive habits may encounter public subjects who orient differently to the world and to others. (p. 98)

By expanding our definitions of appropriate public discourse, a move that seems appropriate given the findings of the analyses in this project, we are potentially participating in the evolution of a new public subject. Through introducing digital public writing tasks in the classroom that encourage students to think about these issues of composition, distribution, and circulation, we can assist students in their development as students, as well as citizens of the university and later on, their communities. Contested as the role of required writing courses on college campuses may be, the field of rhetoric has long been linked to teaching students not only how to express themselves adequately, but how to express their ideas in thoughtful and meaningful ways to enact positive change in the world around them—and even now, we find ourselves concerned with these issues, as illustrated by the emphasis our field places on our students’ abilities to succeed past our classrooms.

And it is just for the same reason that we should be concerned with methods of digital civic engagement as teachers, should we be concerned as citizens. People are starting to use the Internet, and applications connected to the Web, in ways previously unimagined. As a digital form of civic engagement, the importance of the Internet for this form of public writing is incredibly significant. Running through this project have been mentions of and gestures towards arguments concerning the democratic capacity or value of the World Wide Web. Though this project does not explicitly take up this question, I believe that the discussions about democracy that can be facilitated by the study of online petitions, as well as the potential interjections that online petitions can make in the democratic process, illustrate the potential for the Internet to be a vehicle for civic engagement and activism. The Internet, though an imperfect entity itself, can be used for movements motivated by the desire for all groups to communicate productively using digital spaces, so that a just decision may be reached. And, “If these technologies can be adequately diffused across various segments of society and into different communities, the end result will be the enhancement of civic development, integration, and
democratization” (Jeffres, 2007, p. 136). Online petitions are just one example of such a technology.

The versatility of online petitions, illustrated by the multitude of communicative modes and varying levels of adherence to template suggestions of the sample, leads me to claim that online petitions are a genre that can be used in many situations, and will continue to be used for years to come. The explicit use of rhetoric, which occurred at high levels in the sample for this project, suggests that public texts can use rhetoric effectively and often—a finding that is supported by the rhetorical theories of Hauser (2008) and Young (1996, 2000). Petitions are highly contextual creations—that is, their generic components, their rhetorical appeals, and their content, all depend heavily on the motivation and situation spurring on the composition of the text. They are often linked to personal wishes and desires, and so resonate with other members of the community in which they are circulated. Rhetoric has always been linked to public life—an understanding that has been forwarded by many scholars over our field’s history, and I suggest, will continue to be perpetuated, especially with the proliferation and availability of digital texts. Digital texts are different from more traditional forms of public writing, because they are shaped by technological templates and the opportunities afforded by digital circulation; even if the writing tasks do not seem completely new, they enable citizens to engage with public issues in forums and situations not previously experienced, making them an important component of the democratic process in modern America.
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Appendix: Full Titles and Text of Petitions in Sample

We The People Petitions:

**Petition W1:**
“Declare Muslim Brotherhood organization as a terrorist group”

Muslim Brotherhood has a long history of violent killings & terrorizing opponents. Also MB has direct ties with most terrorist groups like Hamas.

A book by one of their prominent figures, Sayyid Qutb, called Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq is the bible for many terrorist groups.

The Muslim Brotherhood has shown in the past few days that it is willing to engage in violence and killing of innocent civilians in order to invoke fear in the hearts of its opponents. This is terrorism.

We ask the US government to declare MB as a terrorist group for a safer future for all of us.

Issues: Civil Rights and Liberties, Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement, Foreign Policy

**Petition W2:**
“allow Tesla Motors to sell directly to consumers in all 50 states.”

States should not be allowed to prevent Tesla Motors from selling cars directly to customers. The state legislators are trying to unfairly protect automobile dealers in their states from competition. Tesla is providing competition, which is good for consumers.

Issues: Energy, Innovation, Transportation and Infrastructure

**Petition W3:**
“Provide necessary assistance to prevent Taiwanese people from being murdered by Philippines and rebuild friendship.”

Dear Mr. President,
As we know, Taiwan is an ally who shares the same values with us. It is sad to hear that a 65-years-old unarmed Taiwanese fisherman was killed by Philippine coastguard on May 9th. 51 bullet holes were found.

Many Taiwanese people were convinced by Philippines that the Obama Administration will connive at this brutal shooting attack. The signal from Philippines is forcing Taiwanese move to the other end of the balance. The situation is severe and may harm the interests of the United States.
This is a tough situation, but the bottom-line is crystal clear; firing on unarmed fisherman's boat is not allowed.

The cost of losing Taiwan and its influence in Japan and China is extremely high. We, the People, demand our government to provide assistance to Taiwan.

Sincerely,

Issues: Foreign Policy, Human Rights

**Petition W4:**
**“Urge the FDA to Say YES to Accelerated Approval for safe, effective therapies for children with Duchenne.”**

We urge the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to use the Accelerated Approval pathway for approval and access to safe, effective therapies for Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy - the leading genetic killer of children that impacts 1 out of every 3,500 boys born in the United States. It's time for the FDA to Say Yes and make this the first generation of Duchenne survivors.

Issues: Disabilities, Health Care

**Petition W5:**
**“Remove United States District Attorney Carmen Ortiz from office for overreach in the case of Aaron Swartz.”**

It is too late to do anything for Aaron Swartz, but the who used the powers granted to them by their office to hound him into a position where he was facing a ruinous trial, life in prison and the ignominy and shame of being a convicted felon; for an alleged crime that the supposed victims did not wish to prosecute.

A prosecutor who does not understand proportionality and who regularly uses the threat of unjust and overreaching charges to extort plea bargains from defendants regardless of their guilt is a danger to the life and liberty of anyone who might cross her path.

http://lessig.tumblr.com/post/40347463044/prosecutor-as-bully

Issues: Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement, Government Reform, Technology and Telecommunications

Move On Petitions:
Petition M1:
“Save Bees from a Highly Toxic Pesticide”
Petition by Greg Loarie, Earthjustice
To be delivered to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

As a citizen concerned about our nation's health and food security, I urge you to deny Dow AgroScience's application to expand the registration of the bee-killing pesticide sulfoxaflor so that it can be sprayed on corn, alfalfa, oats, and several significant and widely grown crops.

Honeybees are dying at rates unprecedented in history, prompting the U.S. Department of Agriculture to warn that it is no longer confident in our ability to "meet the pollination demands of U.S. agricultural crops." Rather than expand the number of crops that can be sprayed with highly toxic and systemic insecticides like sulfoxaflor, the EPA must take immediate steps to help bees recover. I join with other members of Earthjustice in calling for you to suspend the use of sulfoxaflor on all crops pending a thorough analysis of the impacts to bees and the many crops that depend on bees for pollination.

PETITION BACKGROUND
Bee populations are plummeting! Yet the Environmental Protection Agency recently sided with Dow AgroSciences to approve a new, highly toxic bee-killing pesticide called sulfoxaflor.

And now the EPA is considering expanding the number of crops this pesticide can be sprayed on to include corn, alfalfa, oats, and several other significant and widely grown crops.

Will you help us fight back? Tell the EPA to deny Dow AgroScience’s application to expand the registration of the bee-killing pesticide sulfoxaflor now.

Nearly one-third of our crops—including many vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds—depend on bees for pollination. But bees in our country are dying at unprecedented rates, and scientists are pointing to pesticides like sulfoxaflor as a cause.

A world without bees is unimaginable. Earthjustice is doing everything we can to fight back, using the law and the power of the courts. But we need your help to stop this latest proposal.

Help us ensure that sulfoxaflor does not become the final straw for bees. Take action now to save bees!

Petition M2:
“Stop North Carolina’s sweetheart deal to the fracking industry”
Petition by Paul Hogarth
To be delivered to The North Carolina State House and The North Carolina State Senate
The health and safety risks of fracking are extremely serious, and we as the public have the right to know what chemicals that energy companies are putting into our water and soil.

Please reject SB 786—a sweetheart deal to the fracking industry, which would allow them to continue poisoning our environment under a shroud of secrecy.

PETITION BACKGROUND
With the well-known health and safety risks of fracking, 20 states have passed laws requiring companies to disclose the chemicals they use in the hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) process.

But not North Carolina. In fact, Republican legislators have sponsored a bill—the so-called “Energy Modernization Act,” SB 786—that, among other things, includes mandatory jail time for anyone who discloses what dangerous chemicals are used in the fracking process.

The bill does allow for emergency disclosure to “first-responders” like firefighters or health care workers, but then requires them to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Stop North Carolina’s sweetheart deal to the fracking industry, by urging the state legislature to reject SB 786.

Petition M3:
“Demand an investigation of the GOP’s jobs-for-resignation scheme”
Petition by ProgressVA.org
To be delivered to Department of Justice

Media reports have accused House Republicans and Delegate and Tobacco Commission Chair Terry Kilgore of cutting a deal to provide State Senator Philip Puckett a cushy job at the Tobacco Commission and judgeship for his daughter in exchange for his resignation, swinging control of the State Senate. If true, the deal raises serious questions about Speaker Bill Howell and Terry Kilgore’s manipulation of government jobs as leverage to prevent closing the coverage gap for 400,000 Virginians.

Join us in asking the Department of Justice and State Attorney General Herring to investigate now.

PETITION BACKGROUND
If true, this deal raises serious questions about Speaker Bill Howell and Terry Kilgore’s manipulation of government jobs as leverage to prevent closing the coverage gap for 400,000 Virginians.

This isn’t the first time accusations have arisen regarding mismanagement and patronage at the Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission. In
fact, in 2010 a commissioner was convicted of defrauding the Commission of $4M and a 2011 JLARC report questioned the Commission’s governance practices and called for better oversight. Virginians deserve answers over how state jobs were used as leverage in a political fight over extending affordable health care to Virginia families, and assurances that Tobacco Commission resources haven’t been misappropriated for political purposes under the current management.

Join us in calling for an investigation right now.

**Petition M4:**

“Shut Down Earthquake Causing Injection Wells in Colorado”

Petition by Carl Erickson

To be delivered to Matt Lepore, Director Of Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission

Whereas: There has been recent seismic activity in Weld County Colorado (http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eventpage/usc000r9pp#summary) within 2 miles of two injection wells(http://dnrwebmapgdev.state.co.us/mg2012app/), and

Whereas: The US Geological Survey has determined there is a direct causal link between such injection wells and seismic activity (http://www.usgs.gov/blogs/features/usgs_top_story/man-made-earthquakes/)

Whereas: The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Act charges the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission with “protection of public health, safety, and welfare” (34-60-102).

Therefore, we ask that the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission immediately order that all injection wells within its jurisdiction be closed, and no further wells of this type be allowed to operate in the state of Colorado.

**PETITION BACKGROUND**

I live in Greeley Colorado. We had an earthquake last night (5/31/2014). I don't want to end up like the Oklahoma City area with a cluster of these quakes because the oil and gas companies are too lazy to clean up their polluted water and just inject it into deep wells.

**Petition M5:**

“Wildfires on public land: Causes, Costs and Prevention”

Petition by Nancy Freeman

To be delivered to The United States House of Representatives, The United States Senate, and President Barack Obama

Please mandate that Forest Service and Department of Interior agencies designate our tax money for emergency measures to prevent wildfires now. The drought in the West makes the situation urgent. According to the National Interagency Coordination Center, there
are 7 uncontained and 3 new wildfires on public lands on May 31, 2014.

The Government must act now to accomplish:
1) Stopping any industrial activities in the forests that contribute to wildfire danger.
2) Clearing of excess fuel: underbrush and ladder brush
3) Creating fire lines with environmentally friendly mechanical mulches
4) Instituting fire safety education and inspections in communities located in potential wildfire areas.

See http://www.g-a-l.info/ForestFireReport.htm for detailed information.
There are currently 398 signatures. NEW goal - We need 400 signatures!

PETITION BACKGROUND
Wildfire season has arrived! We are in a serious drought in the Southwest. According to the National Interagency Coordination Center there are 7 uncontained and 3 new wildfires on public lands on May 31, 2014. [http://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_statistics.html]. Yet the Forest Service and Department of Interior agencies (including BLM and Park Service) have not gone into emergency mode to clear underbrush fuels and make fire lines—before the fires start! Wildfire prevention needs to start today!