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Remembering Earth Day: The Struggle over Public Memory in Virtual Spaces

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Remembering Earth Day: The Struggle over Public Memory in Virtual Spaces

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Abstract

Over the past forty years, individuals and groups have remembered Earth Day in various ways. This thesis project focuses on the public memory of Earth Day, seeking to understand how different groups have promoted particular pasts for present interests. Public memory scholars broadly define public memory as the reconstitution of particular memories in order to meet the goals and interests of the present and the future. The memories crafted by two broad groups on the Internet are analyzed: official instances of public memory from government organizations and vernacular instances of public memory from environmentalist groups. This project argues that a historical account of Earth Day set in a scene of visible pollution with the need for institutional actors and actions was employed by official and vernacular memories in order to meet their particular interests. The analysis highlights that official memory used the historical account of Earth Day to shift the locus of responsibility for continued environmental change to individuals who are constituted as consumers. Vernacular memory attempts to subvert official memory by creating an activist subject position where individuals can hold institutions accountable for environmental injustices. As different needs and desires arise for the public memory of Earth Day, various groups have refashioned the messages of Earth Day to meet their evolving needs and desires.
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Chapter One: An Introduction to Earth Day and Public Memory

Imagine a lake so filled with toxic chemicals that no fish can survive. Imagine air pollution so thick you can see it all around you. Imagine a river so polluted it actually catches fire. This was the reality for many American communities only forty years ago. (Jackson, 2010, epa.gov/earthday/)

In the late 60s and early 70s American awareness of the environment and the detrimental impact society had on it began to change. Seeing firsthand the environmental consequences of industrial pollution in their air, land, and water, Americans came together in one of the largest environmental demonstrations in history. Earth Day 1970 is remembered as a success in facilitating environmental policies that cleaned up and continue to protect the environment.

April 22, 2010 marked the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. The first Earth Day, held in 1970, sought to raise environmental awareness and motivated the public to demand government policies encouraging environmental sustainability. Mary Graham (1999) says that during this period “people became outraged by the pollution from factory smokestacks that blackened window sills and reduced visibility and by the pollution of refineries and steel mills that clogged rivers in some urban areas” (p. 5). The highly visible impact of industry on the environment highlighted the need for changes in environmental policy at the national level. Public concern grew over the visible damage to the environment, and soon the “common enemy was the American industry, the source of much of the pollution that people could see or smell” (Graham, 1999, p. 2). Earth Day tapped into “an undercurrent of public concern about environmental damage that had accumulated from a generation of extraordinary prosperity” (Graham, 1999, p. 2).
The first Earth Day in 1970 preceded a major push for pro-environmental legislation, which has not been seen since that time. According to Hayes (2010), in the three years following the original Earth Day, “Congress passed the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, Superfund Act, and the National Environmental Education Act” (p. 27-28). While a number of factors play a role in the diminished policy and legislative accomplishments of the environmental movement since then, one possible factor is the co-optation of the Earth Day by organizations without an environmentalist agenda. Corporations and government bodies, as well as environmentalist groups, produce messages and memorials about Earth Day that might not dovetail with the goals of Earth Day’s organizers or the groups that are heir to those organizers.

In remembering Earth Day, different groups contest with one another as those differing memories shape and reshape present and future needs. Public memory—the pieces of the past that are adapted “so as to enrich and manipulate the present”—is a useful framework for understanding how struggles over remembering Earth Day play out (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 4). The Earth Day story presented above is only one way to remember Earth Day. As different versions of the Earth Day story are constructed, different meanings for Earth Day emerge. As Vivian (2004) argues, “We may remember the same events over and over again, but we remember them according to fluctuating conditions, in different times and places, in response to changing needs and desires” (p. 190). The government and environmentalists are two broadly defined groups that have a stake in shaping the public memory of Earth Day. Earth Day remembrances are adapted and used by these groups to further overlapping, yet distinct, policy goals and interests.
The contestation that occurs as the government and environmentalists create public memories of Earth Day primarily plays out on the Internet as it is a space where remembrances of Earth Day can be maintained and disseminated year-round.

The original celebration of Earth Day has become a locus for public memory and the struggles that take place over public remembrances. First, this chapter will review previous literature on public memory and environmental communication and visual rhetoric as these two fields are important components to the analysis. Second, this chapter justifies studying the public memory of Earth Day on the Internet. Third, it will outline the methodological approach and introduce the rhetorical artifacts under consideration. Finally, this chapter will outline research questions and preview the remaining chapters.

**Literature Review**

**Defining Public Memory**

The roots of public memory began in the study of the individual mind and its cognitive capacity to remember in the field of psychology (Zelizer, 1995). In early studies, memory was seen as retrieval instrument, but in later work, psychologists began to see that individual memory was a construction that was shaped both by the past event and present circumstances (Bartlett, 1932; Bergson, 1988). Over time, there was an increased emphasis on studying memory from within a social framework (Zelizer, 1995). In 1951, Maurice Halbwachs coined the term collective memory because, he argued, memory was an activity of the collective rather than the individual (Halbwachs, 1992). Today, “Scholars have come increasingly to see memory as a social activity, accomplished not in the privacy of one’s own gray matter but via shared consciousness with others” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 215).
Edward Casey in his essay “Public Memory in Place and Time” explores the difference between individual and collective memory (2004). Casey (2004) argues that individual memory cannot be wholly separated from either social or collective remembrance: Individual memory does not occur in a vacuum but in a social space where it is influenced and shaped by others. Casey (2004) defines three types of memory: individual, social, and collective. Social memory “is memory shared by those who are already related to each other, whether by way of family or friendship or civic acquaintance or just ‘an alliance between people for a specific purpose’” (Casey, 2004, pp. 21-22). Social memory is influenced by people we know and come into contact with. He associates it with “co-reminiscing,” where people remember together a particular event (Casey, 2004). In this way, social memory is memory that is shared between members of a family, community, or group. Collective memory, on the other hand, does not occur between people who know each other. In this context, collective memory occurs when there is shared content between otherwise unrelated individuals. It is the collective remembrance Casey (2004) refers to that is of importance to scholars for understanding “the establishment of social identity, authority, solidarity, [and] political affiliation” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 217).

Scholars have defined several variations of collective memory: public memory, social memory, national memory and vernacular memory (Kansteiner, 2002). These separate, yet overlapping, categorizations come from an array of fields. For the purposes of a rhetorical analysis, public memory seems to be the appropriate term given the relationship between rhetoric and public. In fact, Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) argue, “We have chosen to use the designator ‘public’ memory here, because of rhetoric’s
emphasis upon concepts of publicity” (p. 6). The word “public” is, perhaps, public memory’s most important defining characteristic and as such, it is necessary to discuss how public memory is defined in terms of “public.”

Phillips (2004) explores the role of “public” in defining public memory. In his collection of essays on public memory, Phillips (2004) offers a look into the various definitions and approaches to public memory studies based on how scholars define “public.” Phillips (2004) posits that public memory has traditionally been studied in one of two frames, the memory of publics and the publicness of memory. Scholarly work performed in the memory of publics frame explores how memory affects and is affected by publics (Phillips, 2004). Phillips (2004) suggests that scholars working in this frame believe in some type of public sphere and recognize that public memory is more than mere individuals remembering the same event; it is individuals that have come together and remember as a public. Scholars studying under the umbrella of publicness of memory approach memory by looking at how memories become public (Phillips, 2004). These categories are not mutually exclusive, but the approaches are subtly different.

For example, Casey (2004) approaches public memory from the frame of memory of publics. He argues that public memory must be tied to a place. In fact, he contends, “Public memory is not a nebulous pursuit that can occur anywhere; it always occurs in some particular place” (Casey, 2004, p. 32). For Casey (2004), this is a distinction that belongs only to public memory and diverges from individual, collective, and social types of memory. He suggests that a necessary trait of public memory is that people meet in person, in a particular place where the memories are created (Casey, 2004). He specifically studies a memorial created after 9/11 in Union Square Park (Casey, 2004).
this public place, people came together to share stories, reminisce, and mourn. This place, Casey claims, is the site necessary to initiate and carry out a public memory of those who died as a result of 9/11 (2004). It is in the public sphere, Casey believes, that individuals can create public memory and it is through public memory that publics negotiate reality (2004). Also framing public memory as *memory of publics*, Browne (1993) argues that public memory is rhetorical, focusing on its persuasive functions in a culture. He claims that public memory is a type of performance (Brown, 1993). He equates the performative nature of public memory to epideictic oration, using Daniel Webster’s *Plymouth Rock Oration* as an extended example (Brown, 1993). As a performance, Brown says that public memory is an embodied, commemorative practice that requires the presence of others (1993).

Scott (2004), on the other hand, focuses on the way in which memories appear or become public (*publicness of memory*). He says, “When we wish to understand ‘public,’ our attention will be drawn not so much to the content of public memories as to their appearing enactment” (Scott, 2004, p. 149). Scott (2004) offers a direct comparison between the frames Phillips has suggested, and he does so by exploring how memories become or appear in public rather than examining the effects of public memory on publics. Shackel (2001) also explores how public memories become public: Memories become public as a result of ideology and power, “when a group has the resources and power to promote a particular past” (Shackel, 2001, p. 655). Media is an important component to defining public memory as it is a primary means of making memories public (Ebbrecht, 2007).
Qualities that Animate Public Memory

Within both frameworks of public memory studies, scholars identify several key qualities that define public memory. Based on the work of Dickinson et al. (2010) and Zelizer (1995), I identify six qualities that animate public memory: 1) memory is temporal; 2) memory facilitates shared identities; 3) memory relates to history; 4) memory is connected to a particular space/place; 5) memory is open to contestation; and 6) memory is manifested in material artifacts.

First, public memory is temporal: Memories are drawn from the past in order to help us shape the present and, by implication, the future. People make choices, recalling particular elements of the past that serve to instruct them on present and future beliefs and behaviors. Many scholars who discuss the connection between the past, present and future refer to memory in terms of its temporality (Assmann, 1995; Bergson, 1988; Casey, 2004; Lowenthal, 1998; Vivian, 2004; Zelizer, 1995). Casey (2004) argues that memory is both past and future oriented because it calls for remembrance while ensuring remembrance in the future. Casey (2004) also suggests that memories are, by their very nature, partially malleable and can change over time. Lowenthal (1998) suggests that memories are selections of the past that are reconstructed based on present social perceptions: “The prime function of memory, then, is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present” (p. 4). Similarly, Zelizer (1995) points out that “collective memories help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it” (p. 217). Like Casey (2004), Zelizer (1995) stresses the malleability of memories: they can be reshaped to meet present and future needs. In the same vein, Vivian (2004) posits that “we may remember the same events over and over again, but
we remember them according to fluctuating conditions, in different times and places, in response to changing needs and desires” (p. 190).

Second, public memory scholars base their work off the assumption that memories facilitate shared identities. Through identification, memories serve to anchor individuals within groups (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Like Irwin-Zarecka, Kammen (1994) argues that memories are created and recalled through collective ideologies and identities. In a similar vein, Casey (2004) speaks of the ability of common identities to carry on public memory: “So, too, public memory (...) carried on within our individual and shared sense of public identity” (p. 38). Casey (2004) elaborates on this idea by arguing that our shared identity indicates who we are as individuals and as part of a larger culture. Not only does Casey believe that memory facilitates identification, our identities make possible the continuation of public memory (2004). Kammen’s (1994) emphasis on the role of ideology in the formation of public memory dovetails with Maurice Charland’s constitutive rhetoric. Charland (1987) contends that the “collective” or “people” exist only through an ideological discourse that constitutes them. These collective identities are carried on through narratives. Charland (1987) identifies three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric. The first ideological effect is “the process of constituting a collective subject” (Charland, 1987, p. 139). The constitution of a collective subject occurs because the narratives “constitute subjects as they present a particular textual position as the locus for action and experience” (pgs. 138-139). The second ideological effect—one that is key to linking public memory and constitutive rhetoric—is the creation of a transhistorical subject: Time is collapsed so that individuals in the present identify with actions and actors in the past (Charland, 1987, p. 140). The third ideological
effect is “an illusion of freedom” (Charland, 1987, p. 141). Charland argues that “subjects within narratives are not free, they are positioned and constrained” (1987, p. 140). This means that in any narrative there is only the illusion of freedom because “the narrative is a structure that produces totalizing interpretations, the subject is constrained to follow through, to act so as to maintain the narrative’s consistency” (Charland, 1987, p. 141).

Charland has highlighted how identities are constituted through narratives, like those found in many discursive forms of public memory. In the public memory of Earth Day, it is important to highlight that two types of identities are offered: The government has created the identity of consumerism through the public memory of Earth Day, and the environmentalist organizations challenge that consumerist identity by offering activism as an alternative. Because consumerism and activism are key components of this analysis, what follows is a brief discussion of these frameworks.

Bauman (1987) defines consumer culture as “a culture of men and women integrated into society as, above all, consumers…Thus every item of culture becomes a commodity and is subordinated to the logic of the market either through a direct, economic mechanism, or an indirect psychological one” (p. 166). Commenting on the economic and psychological implications, Lury (1996) says that “consumption as it occurs in all societies is ‘beyond commerce’, that is, it is not restricted to commerce, but is always a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon” (p. 11). The cultural aspect comes into play because, as Lury (1996) argues, “the utility of goods is always framed by a cultural context… material goods are not only used to do things but they also have a meaning, and act as meaningful markers of social relations” (p. 12). To elaborate on the idea that material goods help individuals construct their identities, Corbett (2006) says,
“More and more, the primary way we construct our life experiences is through consumption, not the everyday experiences of work and social relationships” (p. 94).

To explain how the consumer culture allows individuals to construct their identities through purchases, Corbett deploys the term “buyosphere”. Corbett (2006) argues that the buyosphere is the physical and virtual place in which individuals establish their identity. More importantly, Corbett highlights “that this ‘buyosphere’ is not a civic space, for individuals in a society with an all-powerful marketplace behave more like a nation of consumers than a nation of citizens” (2006, p. 94). Therefore, issues of power and control are inherent in consumerism. Part of the power of consumerism derives from controlling individual choice, Greider (2003) says that American “consumers are in a weak position and have very little actual leverage over the content of what they buy or how it is produced” (p. 10). Killingsworth and Palmer (1996) posit that consumerism, in particular green consumerism, serves political ends because it in no way challenges “the primary values of Western liberal democracy” (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1996, p. 223). In their study on green consumerism literature, Killingsworth and Palmer (1996) note, “Indeed, the books appeal to readers who have developed an environmental conscience and are seeking the means of implementing their newfound values without betraying a fundamental commitment to the established political norms of private property and individual freedom” (p. 223). In this way, consumer culture is maintained through ideological structures that control individual identity and choice.

Counter-publics continue to challenge consumer culture because it allows for only one subject position – the consumer – to exist in society. Environmental groups, specifically, see fundamental problems with the confinement of identity to what
individuals buy. Click and Ridberg (2010) make this issue explicit in their study of alternative food activism: “This focus on the individual, instead of collective, action has opened food activism to critiques that it is too focused on consumer politics and lacks the force necessary to make substantive changes in the global food system” (p. 304). The challenge for environmentalists is to reveal the underlying assumptions inherent in consumerism and the limits that consumerism has on large-scale environmental change. Therefore, shaping and rebuilding identities becomes important as different groups establish a public memory of Earth Day.

Third, memories are related to history, but there is some disagreement over the extent to which memory and history overlap. Nora argues that memory and history are separated and appear to be at odds (1989). She says of memory: “It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (Nora, 1989, p. 8). History “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (Nora, 1989, p. 8). The difference between memory and history is based on memory’s temporality as it is always tied to the present, whereas, history only represents the past (Nora, 1989). Halbwachs (1992) takes a similar stance when discussing the opposition of memory and history. He suggests that memories are sustained among groups and they belong to individuals and collectives (Halbwachs, 1992). History, on the other hand, belongs to no one in particular and can, therefore, claim universal authority (Halbwachs, 1992). Nora (1989) and Halbwachs (1992) articulate a notable separation between the historical facts
as representations of the past and memories as always tied to the present and belonging to specific persons and cultures.

Other scholars have argued that the lines between history and memory are not as distinct as Nora and Halbwachs argue. Challenging the distinction made by Nora (1989) and Halbwachs (1992), Kansteiner (2002) notes that memory and history are often the same, and he suggests that memory and history are subjective and socially constructed. Other scholars take a middle-of-the-road approach when discussing the relationship between memory and history. Schwartz and Heinrich (2004) believe that history and memory cannot be separated from one another. They say, “Collective memory can have no significance apart from the relation among what historians say about the past…” (Schwartz & Heinrich, 2004, p. 117). Zelizer (1995) finds that memory studies generally do not distinguish history from memory; rather most memory scholars envision memory and history as bound together. She concludes that memory and history “can be complementary, identical, oppositional, or antithetical at different times” suggesting that the connection between the two is far from black and white (Zelizer, 1995, p. 216). However, Zelizer is quick to point out that memory and history do have their differences (1995). Memory can be seen as a sort of “history-in-motion” rather than static or “unidimensional study of the past” (Zelizer, 1995, pgs. 216-17). She adds that memory is rearranged for present and future needs and is not concerned with accurate historical accounts of events (Zelizer, 1995). Vivian (2004) clearly outlines that while history and memory might overlap at times, the essential qualities of memory is that public memory is “nomadic and perpetually unfinished,” and therefore, is not concerned with the “allegedly essential and unchanging content of meaning” (p. 204).
Fourth, most public memory scholars posit that memory is connected to a specific space or place. Although she studied individual memory, Yates (1966) was one of the first to connect place and memory arguing that places are the building blocks necessary to remembrance. Nora (1989) suggests that these places or “sites of memory” define memory itself. Casey (2004) also sees place as a necessary component of memory: Place is important for “its power of drawing out the appropriate memories in that location” (2004, p. 32, emphasis added). Therefore, public memory can be both physical (Casey, 2004) and symbolic (Ebbrecht, 2007; Vivian, 2004). According to Casey (2004) public memory is an embodied practice because of its connection to a place where people can “congregate for a common purpose” (p. 33). While he recognizes the importance of place, Vivian emphasizes the symbolic quality of place for memory over the qualities of embodiment and actual physical space. He argues that place/space is not defined by embodiment, but is symbolic in nature. Ebbrecht (2007) views place symbolically as well, arguing that in modern memory culture, place is manifested in the virtual world. Ebbrecht (2007) contends that through media such as television, public memory is created. Regardless of whether or not the place is physical, symbolic, or both, scholars recognize that memory is contingent upon particular spaces or places.

Fifth, memory is open to contestation. Public memory scholars argue that because of its temporality and partiality, memory can be contested in a variety of ways (Bodnar, 1992; Browne 1993 & 1995; Casey, 2004; Schudson, 1992; Vivian, 2004; Zelizer, 1995 & 2004). The fact that memory can be contested raises issues of power and a division between official and vernacular memories (Bodnar, 1992; Browne, 1995; Kaes, 1990; Kansteiner, 2002; Shackel, 2001; Steinberg & Taylor, 2003; Vivian, 2004; Zelizer,
Vivian (2004) suggests “public memory is political memory” because it “is often (if not always) socially contested, and therefore politically inflected” (p. 190). Schudson (1992) argues along the same lines positing that memory can be used as an “ideological weapon” and “any account [of memory] is vulnerable to challenge and revision” (p. 52). Browne (1995) contends that the texts of memories are rhetorical battlegrounds and as such, public memory is inherently ideological. Browne (1995) argues that memory is “material and symbolically charged, and [is] culturally local” (p. 248). He argues that it is the symbolic nature of memory that provides its ability to connect pasts to presents and presents to futures (Browne, 1995). Memory, therefore, is constructed through symbolic interaction. These symbolic interactions which forge memories occur “in the crucible of ideology and the politics of identity” (1995, p. 242). The emphasis on contestation in public memory studies fits the recognition of struggles by counter-publics in environmental disputes. In her case study of Warren County, NC where a toxic landfill was placed in a minority community, Pezzullo (2001) argues that the community was able to “critically interrupt” the dominant narratives “that sustain oppressive environmental conditions” (p. 1). Dominant narratives of environment that allow for these oppressive conditions are partial and thus open to contestation, negotiation and reframing in the same ways as public memories in other issues are.

Ideology is an important aspect of the formation of memory, but it also creates space for forgetting (Browne, 1995). Scholars have recognized a dialectic of remembering and forgetting that occurs, in part, because of the symbolic nature of memory (Browne, 2004; Glassberg, 1996; Shackel, 2001; Zelizer, 1995). Shackel (2001) acknowledges this dialectic when he argues of memory that it can be about “forgetting
about or excluding an alternative past” (p. 657). Shackel (2001) sees forgetfulness as an act of human agents to sustain power over others. Glassberg (1996) also discusses issues of power in strategic forgetting. Glassberg (1996) posits that humans can forget the past, but those things that are forgotten often suppress subordinate groups while strengthening the authority of those in power. For Glassberg (1996) and Shackel (2001) forgetting is strategic in leaving others out of the picture. Zelizer (1995) also believes that forgetfulness is a strategic endeavor. “Incompleteness becomes no less compelling when we consider what has been left out of the study of memory by virtue of its being left out of memory itself – the omissions, rearrangements, strategic moments of forgetting” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 214).

The fact that memory is contestable and is connected with ideology highlights issues of power and authority. Scholars who study memory pay close attention to whose memories are bring advanced at the expense of others (Bodnar, 1992; Browne, 1995; Kaes, 1990; Wood, 1999; Steinberg & Taylor, 2003; Zelizer, 1995). Bodnar (1992) and Browne (1995) suggest that an official version of memory is sponsored by those in power to maintain their authority in the culture. Kaes (1990) discusses power in terms of those that control the images that hold our memories. He argues that because we have become an image culture, the ability to control the production, dissemination, and recall of images is tantamount to constructing an official memory (Kaes, 1990). Wood (1999) claims that “public memory – whatever its unconscious vicissitudes – testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past so that these will be embraced by individuals as their own” (p. 2). Wood posits that institutions and dispositions of power strategically shape the
landscape of public memory in a hegemonic manner that maintains the power of the elite without the knowledge of individuals within groups and cultures (1999).

Zelizer (1995) also sees the importance of power in the struggle over memories. She contends that “Interest in memory becomes a consideration of power and reflection of the ways in which power has historically been assigned” (p. 228). Steinberg and Taylor look at the power of a government to control public memory in their case study of the Guatemalan landscape. Here, the authors discuss collective fear of the government based on events of the past (Steinberg & Taylor, 2003). The conflict in Guatemala has made it difficult for citizens to construct any memorials for fear of government reprisal, which leaves the remembrance to private, individual memories (Steinberg & Taylor, 2003). Therefore, the only public memory that exists is that of the government which has valorized itself through museums and monuments as the savior of the people (Steinberg & Taylor, 2003). In this case, those in power dictate which memories are advanced, whether or not those memories represent the collective.

Contests over public memory are often framed as the struggle between official and vernacular memory (Bodnar, 1992; Kansteiner, 2002; Shackel, 2001; Vivian, 2004). Bodnar (1992) believes that public memory is constructed through two types of cultures, one official and one vernacular. The official culture, he claims, is sustained by the elites in society such as government bodies; whereas, vernacular cultures are local and community oriented (Bodnar, 1992). Official culture seeks to maintain ideologies, and vernacular culture wants to change the status quo (Bodnar, 1992). Bodnar (1992) maintains that through these two cultures contestation occurs over “fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very
meaning of the past and present” (p. 14). Running parallel to Bodnar’s argument, Shackel (2001) says that there is a struggle over memory as elites attempt to establish an official memory. As a result, Shackel concludes, alternative memories are constructed that work to “subvert the meaning of the past through alternative histories” or to establish “more representation in the form of a more pluralistic past” (2001, p. 657). Like Bodnar, Shackel (2001) claims that official memories maintain the ideals of cultural authorities and these memories serve to maintain the status quo and he adds that alternative or vernacular memories are constructed to contest the assumptions inherent in societal norms. However, according to Dunn (2010), the distinction between official and vernacular memories is simplistic. Dunn argues that scholars need to be cognizant of the ways in which “public memories are products of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory publics and counterpublics that muddle simple distinctions” (2010, p. 638). Therefore, the public memory scholar must attend to the multiple iterations of official and vernacular memories to capture the complexity of public memories that might at times overlap and at other times diverge from one-another (Dunn, 2010).

Sixth, public memory is manifested in material artifacts. Scholars that explore public memory recognize that memory becomes a material manifestation that can be found in everyday artifacts (Assmann, 1995; Browne, 1995; Kansteiner, 2002; Zelizer, 1995). Zelizer (1995) says that “cultural forms such as monuments, diaries, fashion trends, television, retrospectives, museum openings, and fashion shows, all house memories in a durable fashion, anchoring the transient and variable nature of memory itself” (1995, p. 232). She terms these material artifacts as the “media” which aid the remembrance process (Zelizer, 1995). Browne (1995) suggests that “public memory lives
as it is given expressive form” (p. 248). Like Zelizer (1995), Browne believes that public memory is found or survives in cultural artifacts (1995). Specifically, Browne (1995) refers to texts that are open to critical assessment by the public memory scholar. He posits that within these texts, scholars can “find” public memory. Assmann argues that memory is objectified through “texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments” which serve to hold a particular past event in the minds of those living presently (1995).

Nora (1989) elaborates on the significance of the material suggesting that “What we call memory is in fact the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled” (p. 13). Though she did not address digital archives specifically, Nora (1989) foresaw a collective reliance on a “memory bank.” In this respect, the material productions such as texts and images are placed in an infinite storage container to be recalled at any moment (Nora, 1989). She believes that the present collective has adopted a “record as much as you can, something will remain” attitude about memory (Nora, 1989, p. 14).

**The Media of Public Memory**

Alongside the multiple definitions of public memory are the variety of material artifacts, contexts, and mediums that scholars analyze. Based on the various interests of scholars, it is clear that public memory is present in every facet of human life. Perhaps some of the most explored mediums of public memory are memorials (Blair & Michel, 2000; Blair, Jeppenson, & Pucci, 1991; Bodnar, 2010; Casey, 2004; Gallagher & LaWare, 2010; Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998; Shackel, 2001; Steinberg & Taylor, 2003) and museums (Armada, 2010; Clark, 2010; Steinberg & Taylor, 2003; Taylor,
However, other scholars have examined the public memory embodied in media like literature (Browne, 2004), speeches (Browne, 1993; Kiewe, 2004), television and film (Ebbrecht, 2007; Kaes, 1990; Lynch, 2007), and the Internet (Haskins, 2007).

While most public memory work has emphasized the study of artifacts that are constructed in tangible or physical ways, the study of public memories located in virtual spaces like the Internet have not caught the attention of many public memory scholars. Haskins (2007) has argued that public memory studies need to understand the importance of new media such as the Internet as a site for public memory. Haskins (2007) says:

I suggest that ‘digital memory,’ more than any other form of mediation, collapses the assumed distinction between modern ‘archival’ memory and traditional ‘lived’ memory by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand, and of presence and interactivity on the other. (p. 401 – 402)

Haskins’ argument is that while the Internet has the capacity for storage, it is also a place where memory is constructed. The first half of her argument aligns closely with Nora’s (1989) argument that modern memory relies heavily on what she calls a “memory bank.” Haskins (2007) believes that the vast potential of the Internet for storage and symbolic place and its “promise of representational diversity, collective authorship, and interactivity is in need of exploration and critique” (p. 405). Therefore, in order to understand how public memory constructed through the Internet differs from permanent artifacts, public memory scholars need to turn their attention to the Internet as a new way of creating, storing, and reconstituting memories (Haskins, 2007). Ebbrecht (2007) also discusses the archival nature of electronic media:
Television thus creates an archive of historical images that, together with popular discourses on historic events create a collective image of history that is on the one hand composed from many different ‘stories’ but on the other hand is a stereotype, a collectively shared version of history. (Ebbrecht, 2007, p. 222)

Like the Internet, television as an electronic medium has the seemingly limitless capacity to store images for future use. Ebbrecht (2007) acknowledges the importance of studying electronic media as they “have become the most effective institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness” (p. 222). He also argues that electronic media “frames social events such as official remembrance days, and becomes part of contemporary memory culture” (Ebbrecht, 2007, p. 221). Although he addresses television specifically, I believe that the Internet, like television, can frame social events such as Earth Day in ways that construct a public memory of the event.

I argue that the Internet should be included as a virtual space for the formation of public memory. While the Internet serves as a near-infinite archive for our pasts, it is also the place where we recall past events in order to reconstitute them for present needs. While many scholars agree that a place or space helps to “define the boundaries of memory,” whether that place has to be embodied or symbolic is open to negotiation (Zelizer, 1995, p. 223). Casey (2004) contends that what separates public memory from other types is its connection with a specific place or location where people can congregate. In this sense, Casey (2004) is suggesting that public memory must occur in an embodied place. But given the Internet, I argue that not all public memory must be connected to an embodied or physical place. In fact, I contend that places can be either physical or symbolic. Vivian’s (2004) work on Gypsy culture concludes that place/space
is not always defined by embodiment. Vivian (2004) argues that cultures can create memory in a symbolic place or meeting ground. Ebbrecht (2007) also argues that public memory occurs in a symbolic place – on television. Television and film, Ebbrecht (2007) contends is a place where images are stored for future use and where public memory is manifest. The same holds true in our modern memory culture with the importance of the Internet as a medium for exchanging and circulating information. Therefore, I claim that the Internet is a virtual, symbolic space where public memory is created through the reconstitution of past events to meet the needs of the present.

Much of the work on public memory focuses on the role of the visual in constructing public memory (Biesecker, 2004; Ebbrecht (2007); Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Haskins, 2007; Lancioni, 1996; Zelizer, 2004). For example, scholars have used visual rhetoric as a lens to study the construction of public memory in photographs (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Zelizer, 2004), documentary film (Dow, 2004), and movies and books (Biesecker, 2004). Zelizer’s (2004) “The Voice of the Visual in Memory” offers insights into the importance of images as a component of public memory. Zelizer (2004) argues that images work through two forces: “On the one hand, images, particularly photographs, work through a denotative force that is connected with verisimilitude. On the other hand, we expect from images a certain connotative force too” (p. 159). The denotative force she is describing is the ability of images to capture or represent life and the connotative force is the ability of an image to invoke symbolic referents or meanings. In addition to these two “meanings” of an image, Zelizer (2004) notes that a “third meaning” exists in an image. The third meaning of an image is the force that compels viewers to identify with an image after they have encountered both the
denotative and connotative forces (Zelizer, 2004). However, she contends that the third meaning of an image is hard to locate in an image “because it is not situated structurally or in a certain place of the image” and it “is difficult to describe because it involves (...) the image’s obtuseness, its accent or anaphoric side” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 159).

Zelizer (2004) proposes the subjunctive voice as a means for discovering the third meaning of an image. Zelizer (2004) posits that the subjunctive voice, a type of voice, can explicate “both an image’s third meaning and its connection to contingency” (p. 162 – 163). So, exploring the subjunctive voice of an image will aid the public memory scholar in addressing meaning and representation in – both of which are necessary to understand how an image can be reconstituted to meet present needs. She argues that “voice” is “the dimensions of an image that propel it to link with other events at other times and places” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 162). The image is not as straight forward and contains qualifiers or contingencies that could be verbally expressed as “if, then” or “would have” or “might” which serve to open a space where viewers can identify the photo with aspects of their own life (Zelizer, 2004). Zelizer (2004) equates the subjunctive voice in images with the “mood of a verb used to express condition or hypothesis” (p. 163). Essentially, voice of an image is the means through which the image connects with its audience and depicts what is eluding the gaze of the spectator; such elements as the mood or tense of the image can be found in the voice of an image (Zelizer, 2004). Zelizer says subjunctive voice “is concerned with the capacity to couch what is represented in an interpretive scheme of ‘what could be’” (2004, p. 163). Zelizer argues that the subjunctive voice explains how an image taken from the past can allow the present viewer to see the world as if or how it could be, rather than how it is (2004).
The subjunctive, then, is a useful tool to public memory scholars in locating the third meaning and understanding how images are reconstituted from the past to represent present and future concerns.

In addition to exploring the subjunctive voice of images, scholars have also used the iconic image as a lens for analysis. Hariman and Lucaites (2003) describe “Accidental Napalm” as an example of an iconic image. The iconic image, Hariman and Lucaites (2003) argue, is one that embodies beliefs and attitudes about American identity. Thus, they posit that the “Accidental Napalm,” which they describe in great detail, is an iconic image (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). This image, when first circulated, highlighted the conflicting beliefs about war and violence during Vietnam (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). They analyze the image of a young, naked girl fleeing from the scene of a napalm attack and claim that her projection of pain through the photo lens is “a rupture, a tearing open of established narratives of justified military action, moral constraint, and national purpose” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 179). Hariman and Lucaites (2003) trace the image’s importance for speaking about American identity through history and find that over time, the meaning of the image changed. The image became one of personal triumph as a name is attached to the girl in the photo, Kim Phuc, rather than one of anonymous American brutality no longer restrained by morality (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). Hariman and Lucaites say that the image was reappropriated to understanding the woman’s personal story through adulthood and, they argue that the addition of personal narratives serves to diminish the power of the image as a judgment on war and violence (2003).
Dow (2004) studies documentary film through a visual rhetoric lens, focusing on the documentation of woman’s liberation. In her article, Dow (2004) begins by providing a historical analysis of woman’s liberation and the media coverage of woman’s liberation. The fact that the media reporting of the movement was done by men who treated the women with humor at best and contempt at worst led Marlene Sanders to create a series of documentary news segments that offered a positive image of the women’s movement (Dow, 2004). In order to analyze the documentary, Dow (2004) focuses on form, framing, and refutation. First, she argues that the form of the documentary was highly conventional and closely resembled a traditional news story (Dow, 2004). Dow claims, the conventional form of the documentary adheres closely to codes of realism and objectivity that demonstrate the documentary’s expository form and that serve to further the liberal, pluralist goals of the documentary (2004). Dow (2004) further breaks down the documentary into seven segments which included radical groups, reformist groups, and all feminists with transitions narrated by Sanders, the producer. Next, Dow (2004) discusses how the film framed women’s liberation. She contends that the documentary utilized an analogy between feminism and Black civil rights in order to normalize woman’s liberation, which would make it less frightening to the public (Dow, 2004). Finally, Dow (2004) outlines how the documentary refuted the claims the media had made about woman’s liberation. She suggests that the documentary recognized a male audience, welcomed male members into the organization, interviewed men to offer an equal view, and depicts how men can be liberated (Dow, 2004). All of these elements of refutation negated the claims made by the media by showing feminists as
unthreatening and by presenting woman’s liberation as analogous to civil rights (Dow, 2004).

Biesecker (2004) uses visual rhetoric as a lens to explore the creation of public memory in the World War II Memorial and its placement on the National Mall, the hit movie *Saving Private Ryan*, the popular book *The Greatest Generation*, and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, and she argues that these memories aim to inculcate American values into future generations (Biesecker, 2004). Based on her use of multiple media, Biesecker (2004) provides a broad picture of cultural influences on the production of public memory. She argues that the different texts establish “what it means to be a ‘good citizen’” and these texts can be:

Best understood as technologies of national cultural transformation [that] promote social cohesion by rhetorically inducing differently positioned audiences – by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender – to disregard rather than actively to seek to dismantle the inequitable power relations that continue to structure collective life in the United States (Biesecker, 2004, p. 159).

Biesecker provides evidence for this argument by analyzing the four texts separately in to address how each text constructs a public memory and then, working in tandem, maintain a vision of a “good citizen” based on understanding of WWII (2004). Biesecker begins with the World War II Memorial on the National Mall. She examines the negotiation that took place over where the Memorial would be located, and she argues that the decision to place the Memorial on prime National Mall ground was made because locating the memorial at the heart of the Mall identifies World War II as central to our identity as a
nation (Biesecker, 2004). Thus, place is an important symbolic marker of the war and an instruction of what we should learn from the Memorial presently (Biesecker, 2004).

Seeking to understand the creation of World War II as the “Good War,” Biesecker (2004) turns to two popular texts that framed the War in such a way – *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Greatest Generation*. In her analysis of the film, Biesecker (2004) first provides an overview of the film and the important characters of the movie. She then discusses the popularity of the film (Biesecker, 2004). Following this, Biesecker (2004) closely analyzes the film while paying critical attention to the “white male body in pain” and “its heavy reliance on verbal and visual paramnesias” (pgs. 159 – 160). Biesecker provides specific examples from the film of the male body in pain such as the first scene when soldiers rush Omaha Beach and they are mercilessly shot down by Germans awaiting their arrival (2004). Her second critical point demonstrates visual paramnesias, which she says are images that serve to connect the images in the film with identifiable personal experiences of war and feelings of patriotism (Biesecker, 2004). In her analysis of Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation*, Biesecker focuses on how the words in the text serve to shape views about the war and social inequities (2004). Biesecker (2004) posits that “Brokaw’s treatment of WWII delivers the World War II of ‘ordinary’ Americans.” The personal tales included in the book use history to rebuild the nation by placing cultural differences in the background and promoting the “qualities of character developed during the war – self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice.” for the current generation (Biesecker, 2004, pgs. 162 – 163).

Biesecker (2004) adds a fourth text, the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, in order to underscore the previous lack of acknowledgement of women’s
contribution to war-time efforts. She claims that the Memorial acknowledged for the first
time the military service of women from the Revolutionary War to the present day
(Biesecker, 2004). Biesecker argues that the Memorial revises the exclusionary practices
that privilege men’s experiences over women’s experience (2004). Biesecker says,
“Taken together, then, these memory texts assist in the reconsolidation and naturalization
of traditional logics and matrices of privilege that today traverse the various arenas of
collective life, from the political to juridical, the economic to the social” (2004, p. 169).

Methods and Research Questions

The Earth Day websites and other pertinent web-based articles employed in this
analysis come from government and environmental organizations. The two broad groups
were chosen in order to explore contestation over the public memory of Earth Day. The
government organizations which comprise the official public memory of Earth Day
consist of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), White House, National
Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Federal Energy Management Program
(FEMP), Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and America.gov.
The environmental organizations, contained within the vernacular public memory of
Earth Day, consist of the Earth Day Network (EDN), the Environmental Defense Fund
(EDF), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), National Resources
Defense Council (NRDC), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Greenpeace, and Earth First!.
These organizations were chosen to offer a broad range of public memories of Earth Day.
In addition, by exploring institutional and environmental organizations’
conceptualizations of Earth Day, this analysis will highlight the complexity of multiple,
overlapping, and divergent memories of Earth Day as the official and vernacular
memories of Earth Day strategically develop an Earth Day narrative consistent with their particular interests.

This analysis will employ an inductive approach to rhetorical criticism that begins with a close reading of the websites that uses the analytic categories of purpose, persona, audience, tone, structure, supporting materials, and strategies (Campbell, 1979; Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). These analytical categories will not only guide my close reading of the texts under consideration, they will help me to discover anything not covered by the specific research questions, which in turn will also be captured by these categories. The purpose is considered to be those responses desired by the rhetor(s) from his/her audience (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). Audience is described as anyone who receives the message of the rhetor(s) (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). Tone is considered to be the linguistic elements that illuminate the rhetor(s) attitude toward both audience and subject matter (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). Structure is defined as how the rhetor(s) lay out his/her argument (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). In other words, the structure is the form the argument takes. Supporting materials are made up of the evidence the rhetor(s) offers to back up claims made in the argument (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). Other strategies is the last category and it “determines how rhetors shape their material in terms of audience and purpose,” which means that when analyzing for strategies, one would look for strategic uses of any of the above categories employed by the rhetor(s) (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996, p. 26). A descriptive analysis using an inductive approach that involves these analytic categories facilitates the discovery of the ways in which a public memory of Earth Day has been constructed. In conducting a rhetorical
analysis of Earth Day websites, this analysis will broadly identify how these websites frame memory of Earth Day.

In order to understand the elements of history that have been reconstituted by government and environmental organizations, it is important to recognize how these organizations depict Earth Day as a historical event. Public memory scholars point out that different groups participate in the contestation over which memories are advanced and the negotiation that occurs through various publics and counterpublics (Bodnar, 1992; Shackel, 2001; Dunn, 2010). In this analysis, it is important to consider what Dunn (2010) describes as the “multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory publics and counterpublics” that create a public memory of Earth Day (p. 638). Therefore, by using Campbell and Burkholder’s (1996) analytic categories, I will answer the following question: *How do both government and environmental websites depict the action and events of the first Earth Day?*

Many public memory scholars have argued that identity is an essential component of public memory (Browne, 1995; Casey, 2004; Schudson, 1992; Wood, 1999; Zelizer, 1995). Casey (2004) says of the link between identity and public memory that “public memories serve as a horizon within which a public finds itself, constitutes itself, and deliberates its own existence” (p. 4). Furthermore, identity and public memory becomes related to issues of power and agency because “public memory…testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past so that these will be embraced by individuals as their own” (Wood, 1999, p. 2). It becomes important, then, to discover the agents who have constructed the public memory and to find out what agendas or ideologies these agents
have advanced through the dissemination of this memory in the public sphere. I will assess this by using Charland’s (1987) transhistorical subject to answer the following questions: What type of agent and what historical agents are identified in these websites?

As outlined in the literature, much of our public memory is constituted by institutional structures in an attempt to advance and maintain elitist ideologies (Bodnar, 1992; Brown, 1995; Kaes, 1990; Zelizer, 1995). Based on this assumption, it becomes important to explore the role of power and authority in constructing public memory of Earth Day. For this reason, the study will rhetorically analyze the web content, both textual and visual, of environmental groups as well as government institutions to explore the difference of the public memories of Earth Day advanced by each and to discover what differences in the agenda of these websites exist. Based on the assumption of ideology and power, I want to find out, what are the goals of government institutions and environmental organizations in advancing a particular Earth Day memory?

**Overview of Chapters**

Each chapter will address a separate research question. Chapter Two will explore the historical narrative of Earth Day from government and environmental websites in order to answer the first research question. In this chapter, the first section highlights how memories of Earth Day 1970 have been framed in a scene of visible pollution where institutional actors and actions were needed to solve environmental exigencies. After illustrating accounts of Earth Day 1970, this chapter demonstrates how official and vernacular, mainstream and radical, memories of Earth Day 1970 are linked to contemporary Earth Day celebrations. This section shows how official and vernacular
memories have used historical Earth Day remembrances to meet the needs and desires of their particular interests.

In order to explicate the various agents of change created through Earth Day remembrances, Chapter Three will examine the creation of a transhistorical subject in official and vernacular, mainstream and radical, memories of Earth Day. First, this chapter analyzes how public memories of Earth Day constitute a collective subject that allows official and vernacular memories to guide individuals toward a particular action. The official memory constitutes individuals as consumers in order to promote the ideology of consumerism. The mainstream vernacular memory vacillates between official and radical vernacular memories as it attempts to create a consumer who is also an activist. The radical vernacular, on the other hand, completely challenges the other two memories by constituting activists that promote change at the institutional level.

In order to answer the last research question, Chapter Four will explore how official and vernacular memories strategically constitute an Earth Day story, in order to advance their particular interests and authority. This chapter demonstrates how official memory of Earth Day functions within the dominant consumer culture by creating a public memory that guides consumer-driven action. The vernacular memory, mainstream and radical, challenges the official memory by offering activism as an alternative to consumerism.

After considering how public memory has been constituted and contested in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, Chapter Five provides a critical interpretation of how the constitution of the public memory of Earth Day can have environmental implications.
Furthermore, the chapter offers a review of the substantive analysis chapters before providing limitations and suggestions for future research.
Chapter Two: The History of Earth Day

Public memory scholars have emphasized the relationship between history and memory in the construction of public memory. The public memory of Earth Day is constituted as a historical narrative that links Earth Day 1970 and Earth Day 2010 as two moments in a larger progressive history of increased environmental awareness and action. Yet, this narrative is open to contestation by government and environmental groups. The contestation of public memory is often conceptualized as a negotiation between official and vernacular memories (Bodnar, 1992; Shackel, 2001), but Dunn (2010) argues that contests over public memory are “more complicated than the simple dialectical terms like “official and vernacular” or “public and counterpublic” (Dunn, 2010, p. 638). Public memory scholarship must consider the “multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory publics and counterpublics that muddle simple distinctions” like official and vernacular (Dunn, 2010, p. 638).

In this chapter, the range of official and vernacular memories of Earth Day are analyzed to determine how Earth Day memories overlap and conflict. This analysis illustrates how official and vernacular memories have deployed a historical narrative that describes the scene of Earth Day 1970 as one of visible pollution and foregrounds institutional actors completing institutional, legislative actions. As a result of these institutional actions, Earth Day 1970 is seen as a success. In linking Earth Day 1970 and contemporary Earth Day celebrations, this analysis highlights how official memory maintains a balance between environmental change and economic progress by shifting agency to individuals and by eliminating the role of activists in realizing the goals of Earth Day 1970 and current pro-environmental action, while radical vernacular memories
promote society-wide changes to protect the environment, regardless of its impact on economic viability. Although both impart environmental responsibility to individuals, radical vernacular memory calls for activism by individuals to push institutions to create society-wide changes to help the environment.

Earth Day 1970

Visible Pollution

The story of Earth Day 1970 opens with a scene of environmental decay and visible pollution. Both government and environmental groups begin the story of Earth Day by explaining the motivation behind the event, the public’s concerns about visible pollution. As the environmental groups reiterate the official version of Earth Day’s history, I will focus primarily on the government websites: They construct a historical narrative that establishes a scene of visible pollution as the motivation for Earth Day 1970.

The history of Earth Day articulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) depicts a scene of visible pollution. On the EPA Earth Day website, this scene is constructed in two places. The first and more substantial construction comes from a speech by EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson. Jackson describes the American landscape in the years preceding Earth Day:

Imagine a lake so filled with toxic chemicals that no fish can survive. Imagine air pollution so thick you can see it all around you. Imagine a river so polluted it actually catches fire. This was the reality for many American communities only forty years ago. (n.d.)
Jackson emphasizes the visible quality of the pollution and environmental degradation. This visibly polluted scene becomes the driving force for Earth Day 1970. Jackson says, “At the time, people were understandably concerned about harmful pollution affecting their planet, their nation, and their own backyards. So, they decided to take action; twenty million Americans stood up to call for change on the very first Earth Day” (n.d.). Jackson frames the visible pollution of the late 60s and early 70s as the impetus for the first Earth Day.

The second act of historical scene-setting is an article entitled “Earth Day and EPA History: The First Earth Day in April 1970.” The article’s combination of text and image also depicts a scene of visible pollution. The black-and-white image shows a dark cloud of smoke rising from a set of smoke stacks. The text accompanying this image claims, “It may be hard to imagine that before 1970, a factory could spew black clouds of toxic waste into the air or dump tons of toxic waste into a nearby stream, and that was perfectly legal” (“Earth Day and EPA,” n.d.). The visible nature of pollution is emphasized, and the legality of such pollution is also emphasized.

The White House’s Earth Day website also recalls a past of visible pollution and environmental decay in a video of Obama’s 2010 Earth Day speech. As in Jackson’s speech, Obama begins with the scene of the first Earth Day: “Forty-one years ago, in the city of Cleveland people watched in horror as the Cuyahoga River, choked with debris and covered in oil, caught fire. Images of a burning Cuyahoga shocked a nation” (2010). This pollution, Obama notes, “led one Wisconsin Senator, the following year, to organize the first Earth Day to call attention to the dangers of ignoring our environment” (2010).
In this instance, Obama recalls the past event of the Cuyahoga River fire to set the scene of environmental pollution that led to the first Earth Day.

NASA’s Earth Day website also posits a scene of visible pollution as the motivation for Earth Day 1970. Posted on the history section of the website is a personal account by Jack Lewis (1990), author of an EPA journal article, which further supports the argument that environmental degradation was the impetus for Earth Day. Lewis’ article renders a scene of rampant pollution producing a noxious and dismal America:

In the waning months of the 1960s, environmental problems were proliferating like a many-headed hydra, a monster no one could understand let alone tame or slay. Rampant air pollution was linked to disease and death in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere as noxious fumes, spewed out by cars and factories, made city life less and less bearable. In addition, huge fish kills were reported on the Great Lakes…Lake Erie was in death throes… [and] Cleveland’s Cuyahoga River burst into flames by spontaneous combustion. (1990)

He notes, “In a response commensurate with the problem, an estimated 20 million Americans gather together on April 22, 1970, to participate in a spectacularly well-publicized environmental demonstration known as ‘Earth Day’” (Lewis, 1990). Just like the other versions of the official public memory, Lewis frames visible pollution as the motivation behind the first Earth Day.

The fourth government site, America.gov, explains environmental pollution of the 1970s is a result of the industrial progress that began in the 1800s:

In the 19th century, Americans, blessed with a vast land rich in natural resources, lived with the notion that fresh fields were always just over the horizon. When
one exhausted the soil or forests or coal of a given place, it was possible to move on to another. As industry boomed in the early 20th century people accepted without question skies blackened from smokestack emissions and rivers fouled with industrial waste. As early as the mid-1930s—and again in the 1950s—Ohio’s Cuyahoga River, running through America’s industrial heartland, was set ablaze by burning chemical waste from factories built upon its banks. There was no public outcry. Few people even noticed. (Brown, 2008)

This historical account explains how the environment came to be polluted. While the other websites and their public memories truncate the story and begin with environmental pollution in the 1970s, America.gov provides a broader historical account of pollution and environmental degradation. According to this account, environmental attitudes did not begin to change until the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Brown, 2008). In addition, the first image of Earth from space, recorded by Apollo in 1968, illustrated how “small, fragile, beautiful, and unique” the Earth really was (Brown, 2008). In the late 1960s, public opinion about the environment shifted; when the Cuyahoga River caught fire again, “public reaction was immediate and intense” (Brown, 2008). As with other instances of official memory, here the focus is on visible pollution and visible signs of the environment’s fragility found in the Apollo images and Carson’s *Silent Spring*. In this recollection of Earth Day, America.gov has recalled a wider variety of discursive fragments about the past to construct an Earth Day narrative, yet the motivation behind the first Earth Day is identified as the visibility of environmental fragility from the Apollo images and *Silent Spring* as well as the typical images of environmental degradation found in other instances of official public memory.
Vernacular memory, mainstream and radical, reiterates the scene of visible pollution established in the institutional memories. Earth Day Network (EDN), considered the official Earth Day website, builds a scene that is consistent with the others: “At the time, Americans were slurping leaded gas through massive V8 sedans. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of legal consequences or bad press” (“Earth Day,” n.d.). Unlike the official versions of Earth Day’s public memory, EDN identifies cars as major contributors to visible pollution. This broadens the critique from a focus on businesses to the American way of life. Later in the article, EDN directly connects the pollution to Earth Day:

As a result, on the 22nd of April, 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment in massive coast-to-coast rallies. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment. Groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife suddenly realized they shared common values. (“Earth Day,” n.d.)

EDN depicts the scene as one of environmental degradation. As a result of this, millions of Americans came out to celebrate the first Earth Day in order to draw attention to these environment issues and to fight for change.

Although EDN offers the most comprehensive historical account of Earth Day, other environmental organizations also briefly portray a scene of pollution. The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) recounts several key events to establish the scene of environmental pollution as the impetus for Earth Day:
On April 22, 1970, some 20 million people across the country rallied to protest the state of the planet. Cleveland’s Cuyahoga River, a dump for steel mills and other industries, had caught fire. A massive oil spill swamped the coast off Santa Barbara, and concerns about smog, DDT and water pollution were rising. (―Celebrate Earth Day,‖ n.d.)

NRDC recalls the visible pollution of the 1960s as the impetus for Earth Day’s “country-wide rally” on April 22, 1970. In a YouTube video, EDF also describes a scene of environmental degradation. This video, entitled “A Message of Hope on Earth Day 2008,” highlights what the environment was like through images and narration. The narrator describes the images that appear in the video: “DDT almost cost us our national symbol [a close-up of a bald eagle]…Acid rain almost wiped out our forests [an image of a grove of dead trees]” (“A Message of Hope,” 2008). Like the other narratives, EDF develops a scene of environmental degradation. EDF also expresses through the video that because of Earth Day 1970, environmental degradation was halted. This is why the narrator uses “almost” when talking about DDT and acid rain. Because of the first Earth Day, these issues were prevented from completely destroying our environment.

Both government and environmental organizations construct a memory of Earth Day that emphasizes visible pollution as the impetus for environmental action. As articulated by both groups, Americans become aware of the costs of industrial progress when the signs of environmental degradation become visible in the air, the rivers, and the land.
Institutional Actors

In addition to highlighting a scene of visible pollution as the impetus for the first Earth Day, the dominant narrative also foregrounds institutional actors or agents as those responsible for the environmental changes subsequent to Earth Day 1970. These institutional agents are always described as those who not only organized Earth Day, but helped guide the subsequent legislative action. They are primarily politicians and government officials, and the most important actor is Senator Gaylord Nelson, who is described as the founder of Earth Day.

The recollection of Earth Day 1970 on EPA’s Earth Day website describes institutional actors, such as founder of Earth Day, Senator Nelson and those capable of influencing political action (i.e. Congress). For example, in “Earth Day and EPA History: The First Earth Day in April 1970,” the EPA emphasizes the need for institutional and regulatory action to prevent continued pollution. Upon setting a scene of pollution, EPA says that those causing the pollution “could not be taken to court to stop it… because there was no EPA, no Clean Air Act, no Clean Water Act” (“Earth Day and EPA,” n.d.). In other words, political and institutional actors needed to change the legislative and judicial landscape to make environmental action possible. The EPA emphasizes the role of particular actors in the memory of Earth Day it constructs. The selection of these particular actors allows the EPA to make clear that the first Earth Day and subsequent environmental legislative success came about from the drive of institutional actors.

The White House Earth Day website provides historical references to Earth Day in a video of Obama’s 2010 Earth Day speech. Obama’s speech not only describes the condition of the environment by referencing the Cuyahoga River fire, he also attributes
Earth Day to Senator Nelson as the institutional actor behind the event. According to Obama, environmental degradation “led one Wisconsin Senator the following year to organize the first Earth Day to call attention to the dangers of ignoring our environment” (Obama, 2010). By using only Nelson’s title instead of his name, Obama foregrounds Nelson’s role as an institutional actor. Obama’s emphasis on the fact that Nelson was a Senator valorizes the action of institutions and their members as key to making Earth Day and the subsequent environmental action possible.

On the NASA website, the history of Earth Day is articulated through a set of articles previously published in EPA publications. Jack Lewis’ (1990) essay provides a comprehensive account of the first Earth Day. In the introduction, Lewis recalls the scene of environmental pollution. Lewis identifies activists who participated in Earth Day and subsequently founded environmental organizations, but he gives especial prominence to Sen. Gaylord Nelson and identifies him as the founder of Earth Day: “One prominent politician, Gaylord Nelson, then Senator from Wisconsin, had been frustrated throughout the 1960s by the fact that only a ‘handful’ of his congressional colleagues had any interest in environmental issues” (1990). Lewis claims that Nelson said he could “force the issue into the political dialogue of the country” by using the power of students and activists (as cited in Lewis, 1990). In addition to being an institutional actor, Nelson used everyday people to realize the institutional end of Congressional legislation

Gaylord Nelson’s (1980) own article published in the EPA journal details how Earth Day 1970 changed the nation. Nelson explains the importance of Earth Day:

It forcibly thrust the issue of environmental quality and resources conservation into the political dialogue of the Nation. That was the important objective and
achievement of Earth Day. It showed the political and opinion leadership of the country that the people cared, that they were ready for political action, that the politicians had better get ready, too. (1980)

While people are important to this instance of official memory, their role is to spur official/institutional forces to action. By recalling only certain actors from the past, the presence of institutional actors in the public memory is highlighted and reinforced.

An article written by John C. Whitaker (1988) on the NASA website also supports this constitution of institutional actors. Whitaker offers a different perspective on Earth Day: His narrative details the Nixon Administration’s response to the first Earth Day, which was the creation of the EPA. Whitaker (1988) argues that the executive branch had to respond to public demand to clean up the environment. However, many different government agencies and actors held differing opinions regarding how environmental clean-up should occur. Some of the institutional actors who had a stake in environmental regulation and policy, as articulated by Whitaker (1988), were HEW Secretary Bob Finch, Transportation Secretary John Volpe, Agricultural Secretary Clifford Hardin, Secretary of State Bill Rogers, and many more members of the Nixon Administration. According to Whitaker, each of these institutional actors had varied opinions about how to tackle environmental legislation and who should take charge as overseer. Because of all of the confusion and differing opinions, “In July 1970 [President Nixon] submitted to Congress the Environmental Protection Agency plan; the new agency came into being on December 2, 1970” (Whitaker, 1988). In this narrative, the institutional agents were described as both the executive and legislative branches of government. While Whitaker recalls a larger number of actors and actions from the past to develop his Earth Day
account, he emphasizes the institutional nature of Earth Day by choosing institutional actors to develop his story.

America.gov crafts a more complex narrative of Nelson’s inspiration and motivations for Earth Day. America.gov also links Nelson’s environmental awareness to the protests against the Vietnam War:

“‘At the time,’ Nelson later wrote, ‘there was a great deal of turmoil on the college campuses over the Vietnam War. Protests, called anti-war teach-ins, were being widely held on campuses across the nation … It suddenly occurred to me, why not have a nationwide teach-in on the environment? That was the origin of Earth Day.’” (Brown, 2008)

Upon realizing the potential of a national teach-in on the environment, Nelson began rallying for support in Washington (Brown, 2008). According to Brown, “Nelson returned to Washington and began promoting Earth Day to state governors, mayors of big cities, editors of college newspapers and, importantly, to Scholastic Magazine, which is circulated in U.S. elementary and secondary schools” (2008). Later in the article, Nelson recalls, “Using my Senate staff, I ran Earth Day activities out of my office” (Brown, 2008). While Nelson is inspired by the anti-war protests, Nelson is still the focus of the public memory, and as an institutional actor, Nelson relies on institutional actors to help him carry-out his idea. This example highlights that Nelson utilized the assistance of other institutional actors to help him bring his plan to fruition.

When analyzing the historical narratives of vernacular memory, there was similarity between their accounts and those of the official memory. However, the official memory of Earth Day thoroughly developed institutional actors and the vernacular
memory did not spend as much time in their narratives developing institutional actors. Rather, many of the environmental groups focused on institutional actions without explaining what agents performed those actions. Only one environmental organization, part of the mainstream vernacular memory, constituted institutional actors: Earth Day Network (EDN). In an article about Earth Day’s history, the EDN narrative constitutes Senator Nelson as the primary institutional actor behind the event. According to EDN, “The idea came to Earth Day founder Gaylord Nelson, then a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, after witnessing the ravages of the 1969 massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California” (“Earth Day,” n.d.).

**Institutional Actions**

The story of the first Earth Day, articulated by both official and vernacular memory, concludes with institutional action. The dominant narrative not only articulated a scene of visible pollution and constituted institutional actors; it also explained the institutional actions that came about as a result of such actors. Thus, the dominant narrative story-line is as follows: As a result of visible pollution, institutional actors decided to take action by organizing the first Earth Day and by passing legislation to improve and protect the environment in the future.

The action in the EPA historical narrative is established in two areas: through a speech by Administrator Jackson and an article on the website. In Jackson’s speech, she articulates a set of legislative and regulatory actions accomplished by government actors that positively improved the environment, “We’ve helped clean toxins from our air, water, and land” (n.d.). According to the EPA article, Earth Day led to the founding of the EPA and it was the EPA that brought about the changes in air, water, and land quality.
For example, EPA argues, that visible pollution occurred because “there were no legal or regulatory mechanisms to protect our environment” (“Earth Day and EPA,” n.d.). Without the appropriate institutional actors in place, the article claims, environmental degradation could not be stopped. Later in the article, EPA articulates how legislation and regulation was reached: “In December 1970, Congress authorized the creation of a new federal agency to tackle environmental issues, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency” (“Earth Day and EPA,” n.d.). Again, it is the actions of Congress that are framed as the reason that environmental protection is possible, instead of focusing on the protests of Earth Day that pushed for legislators to act.

Obama’s speech on the White House Earth Day website also emphasizes institutional actions. Obama says, “Pollution’s been greatly reduced and Americans everywhere are living in a healthier environment; We’ve passed the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and founded the Environmental Protection Agency” (2010). Obama equivocates between the reduction of pollution and the legislation that allows for the reduction of pollution: Passing legislation is treated as the equivalent of reducing pollution. Mirroring the EPA narrative, Obama’s speech demonstrates the importance of institutional actions in our environmental history. Both suggest the environment is clean because of government action, and both elide the reasons that action was originally undertaken.

Similar to both EPA and White House, NASA’s narrative of Earth Day’s history advances institutional actions as the one’s responsible for the environmental clean-up. In the brief explanation, NASA says, “It was out of this event [Earth Day] that came the first environmental legislation – the Clean Air and Water Acts” (“History of Earth Day,”
While Lewis’ essay focuses on the planning that led to the first Earth Day, he does explain some of the actions of specific institutional actors during that time. For example, without the authority of New York City Mayor, John V. Lindsay, Fifth Avenue would not have been shut down for two hours for the Earth Day celebration (Lewis, 1990). Lewis explains that Earth Day was a success with the help of institutional actors. He details the importance of Senator Nelson’s role in organizing the first Earth Day and subsequently delegating various tasks to make sure the event rallied the American public (1990). Additionally, Lewis does describe the role of the EPA as an institutional body. He says, “With the founding of the EPA in December 1970, the history of the environmental movement entered a new phase” and by unifying the various disparate organizations “it gave a much stronger profile to the federal effort to curb environmental decay across the nation” (Lewis, 1990). This excerpt from Lewis’ article adds to the official public memory of Earth Day by highlighting the important role institutional actor’s play in making sure environmental damage is curbed across the nation.

Nelson’s (1980) article affords a much more in-depth list of institutional actions than did Lewis’ article. In his essay, Nelson explains at length the institutional actions that resulted from Earth Day:

In the ten years since 1970 much of the basic legislation needed to protect the environment has been enacted into law: the Clean Air Act, the Water Quality Improvement Act, the Water Pollution and Control Act Amendments, the Resource Recovery Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the Toxic
Substances Control Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. And, the most important piece of environmental legislation in our history, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was signed into law on January 1, 1970. (1980)

This list of institutional actions identifies legislation as the primary mode of environmental protection. Legislation, not people, becomes key. In his article, Nelson emphasizes the significance of institutional actions over activism by articulating many other accomplishments of the government regarding the environment:

There have been other accomplishments. Today, almost every State has one or more agencies charged with protecting its environment and natural resources.

Nearly 150 universities and colleges have programs for environmental education.

As of Dec. 20, 1979, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had made grants of $24.9 billion for municipal wastewater treatment projects. (1980)

All of the actions described by Nelson have come from the government. His essay implies that the EPA and other institutional actors have successfully accomplished the goal of Earth Day 1970. In this frame, Nelson creates a memory of institutional actors as primarily responsible above other participants for the success of Earth Day.

The final article on NASA’s Earth Day website is by Whitaker (1988). While Whitaker focuses on the Nixon Administration, he also articulates environmental actions as institutional. According to Whitaker, with Nixon’s oversight, a number of actions took place: Nixon was able to secure the implementation of the EPA to bring together some 44
organizations under one umbrella agency and Nixon led the clean-up of the environment (1988). For example, Whitaker states that

the accomplishments of the Nixon years are plain to see. New clean air, water, solid waste, and pesticide laws, coastal zone management planning, seed money, new national parks… In addition, Nixon ordered federal agencies to shed spare federal acreage that would converted into parks and recreation areas, especially in urban areas. More than 82,000 acres in all 50 states were converted into 642 parks. (Whitaker, 1988)

Whitaker provides the list of environmental protections as the result of Richard Nixon. Whitaker’s story solidifies the official memory’s positioning of environmental protection as the result of government actors and actions by giving primacy to institutional agency over the agency of American citizens.

Similar to all the other stories, America.gov’s article on Earth Day’s history describes environmental clean-up as an institutional action. For example, author of the article, Brown says,

Groundbreaking federal legislation followed the success of the first Earth Day. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970, followed by the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Among the many far-reaching provisions of these bills was the requirement that automobiles use unleaded gasoline, achieve a minimum number of miles-per-gallon of gasoline and be equipped with catalytic converters to reduce the amount of toxic fumes released by automobile exhaust. (2008)
Not only does Brown provide the audience with a list of the legislation that resulted from Earth Day 1970, he gives detailed explanations about what these bills entailed demonstrating how these institutional actions actually brought about environmental change. Again, this narrative frame creates a memory of Earth Day that elides the role of other participants who contributed to Earth Day’s success.

The legislation that came out of Earth Day 1970 can be seen as a success from both official and vernacular points of view. For environmental activist organizations, the legislation led to positive environmental outcomes. The emphasis for vernacular memory is not on the institutional actors and actions, but the positive outcome of those actions. As environmentalists, positive environmental change and the long-lasting environmental protection is essential to an environmentally responsible nation. Therefore, less time is spent on describing the actors and actions that produced the first Earth Day. For example, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) says, “That watershed moment in 1970 elevated the issue of environmental protection and was soon followed by the passage of the Clean Air Act and the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). In the vernacular memory, environmental legislation is also seen as a successful outcome of Earth Day because, for environmentalists, the institutional actions of such legislation enabled environmental protection. In another example, the Center for American Progress’ energy team says, “Today our air, land, and water are significantly less polluted due to federal safeguards established since that day” (Manlove & Weiss, 2010). This article clearly articulates the necessity of federal safeguards; for it was these same federal or institutional safeguards that gave us better air, land, and water.
The dominant historical narrative of Earth Day has been driven by official memory. In this instance, the official and vernacular memories overlap substantially. Mirroring the official memory, vernacular memory deployed the same story by recalling similar elements from the past – As a result of visible pollution the institutional actor, Gaylord Nelson developed the first Earth Day; shortly thereafter, other institutional actors such as Congress, Nixon, and the EPA produced institutional action in the form of environmental legislation. By choosing to include only institutional actors and actions, the government is seen as responsible for the environmental change that Americans enjoy. Thus, the official memory downplays the role of non-institutional actors who could have contributed to Earth Day’s success. Therefore, the dominant story tells the audience that without the government’s oversight and authority, the environment would not be protected and we would not have clean air, water, or land.

As Bodnar states, the official culture is sustained by the elites in society, such as government bodies (1992). In this historical narrative, the government has maintained a dominant view of the history of Earth Day, one of which many environmental groups have adopted. Vernacular memory substantially overlaps official memory in the historical narrative of Earth Day because for both the government and environmentalists, environmental legislation – which occurs by way of institutions – is a necessary condition for environmental success. In the next section, the analysis turns to constructions of the contemporary scene of continuing, post-Earth Day actions. The historical narrative becomes important because official memory employs the success of the first Earth Day to argue that the responsibility now lies with individuals rather than the government. Therefore, the historical narrative demonstrates that the government stepped in and got
“us” out of the mess we were in, but as a continual success on the government side, the
impetus for change now lies with the American citizen. Thus, the history of Earth Day
from its inception in 1970 through the last forty years becomes one of continual progress
or improvement, which implies an unbroken continuity of environmental improvement
from Earth Day 1970 to Earth Day 2010.

**Earth Day: From 1970 to 2010**

Official memory has deployed a narrative where the history of Earth Day over the
past forty years has been one of continual progress and success. While the first Earth Day
was remembered for its legislation, its legacy is now realized by individual’s “green”
choices that do not harm the economy or require government intervention. The official
memory of Earth Day 1970 emphasizes institutional agents, but with the move to the
present, the locus of agency shifts to individuals and communities. Because the air, water,
and land were cleaned up – the environment overall become a much healthier place – the
official version of public memory treats Earth Day as a success. Since there is an absence
of visible pollution, institutional actors and actions have been successful and this allows
the government to justify the contemporary focus on the individual as actor.

In this section, the analysis begins with official memory, arguing that the
government websites and articles have constituted a contemporary agent as the
individual. The historical construction of Earth Day 1970 and its constitution as a success
because of institutional actions allows the official memory of Earth Day to place the
impetus for continued change on individuals. The justification for this shift in agent is the
lack of visible pollution. Therefore, the government is seen to have done its job of
liberating the environment from visible pollution. Because the focus is on the individual
and his/her actions at a local level, official memory begins to diverge from vernacular memory. While government groups do state that fixing environmental problems is far from over, they do not create as great a sense of urgency in fixing the problems compared to the environmental groups.

According to the EPA, annual Earth Day events have been a success because American awareness of environmental issues has increased. As Jackson notes:

Every year, more and more Americans join in cleaning up our communities. Earth Day now brings together one billion people in countries throughout the world. This year, on the 40th Anniversary of Earth Day and the EPA, I’m asking you to help us continue the legacy of environmental service-work and help make our communities healthier, our economies stronger, and our country more competitive. (n.d.)

Jackson uses the increased participation of people and nations in Earth Day as evidence of its continued success. Jackson continues to paint a positive picture of Earth Day: “The first Earth Day showed us what we can accomplish when we come together in service. We can literally change the world” (n.d.). Jackson paints an optimistic picture of service work improving the environment.

Like Jackson, President Obama describes the continued environmental improvement spurred by the first Earth Day: “In the four decades since, we’ve made remarkable progress. Today, our air and water are cleaner; pollution’s been greatly reduced; and Americans everywhere are living in a healthier environment” (2010). Obama demonstrates the environmental success facilitated by Earth Day. As a result of the legislation subsequent to the first Earth Day, Obama argues, “And in Cleveland, the
Cuyahoga River is cleaner than it’s ever been in a hundred years” (2010). Earth Day serves as a syndoche for the environmental movement, defined as the reduction of visible pollution. Like Jackson, Obama utilizes enthymematic reasoning to suggest that as a result of Earth Day, “remarkable” pro-environment accomplishments have been made. Obama links contemporary Earth Day events to the historical Earth Day, in order to frame environmental policy as a progressive success over the past forty years.

Similar to the EPA and White House’s frame of Earth Day’s history, NASA constructs a positive picture of Earth Day’s success. However, the NASA website places greater emphasis on Earth Day as a tool for raising awareness. For example, NASA argues that “Earth Day has become perhaps the most prominent catalyst for ongoing environmental education action and change” (“History of Earth Day,” 2011). The NASA website implies that Earth Day was a success in part because it raised awareness and spurred people to action in the forty years subsequent to the event. In another example from NASA, the organization demonstrates the value of Earth Day in encouraging public commitment to environmental action:

 Earth Day celebrations offer an important point of entry to address worldwide environmental concerns… Because Earth Day observances and celebrations broaden the base of support for the environmental programs, rekindle public commitment, and enroll participation from every social and business sector, they can be used to implement wide-scale programs that bring people together to act for the common good. (“History of Earth Day,” 2011)

Earth Day is a stand in for a whole host of environmental awareness programs as well as the peg on which to hang annual green events. Therefore, Earth Day is credited with the
continuation of environmental engagement. In Lewis’ (1990) essay located on the NASA site, he says, Earth Day is “permanently embedded in our culture” (Lewis, 1990). Lewis demonstrates the aura of Earth Day as an event that will have staying power in the American culture. The ideals of 1970 Earth Day demonstrated to Americans the ability of a movement to transcend “traditional political boundaries” and the capacity of the nation to come together for a cause beyond their own personal issues or politics (Lewis, 1990). The way that Lewis defines Earth Day is as a national and international holiday.

Another commonality in the official memory of Earth Day is an emphasis on the ease with which one can support the environment. Obama argues that taking action can be as “simple as riding the bus or the subway to work, making your home more energy efficient, or organizing your neighbors to clean up a nearby park” (2010). He tells Americans that small changes rather than large drastic ones are sufficient for creating environmental change. In emphasizing the ease with which environmental change can occur, Obama projects confidence in the ability of individuals and communities to contribute to positive environmental change, and through his speech, it becomes clear that it is incumbent upon individuals to realize this change. For example, Obama says, “It’s clear that change won’t come from Washington alone; it will come from Americans across the country who take steps in their own homes and their own communities to make that change happen” (2010). Similarly, Jackson from the EPA says, that “we can literally change the world starting with service in our community” and “if we all do our part, Americans… will remember this generation as one that helped build a better future for everyone” (2010 Jackson emphasizes the commitment needed at the local level. She argues that all Americans must do their part, no matter how small, to produce small-scale
changes that reflect the success she imputes to the first Earth Day. In his essay on NASA’s website, Whitaker notes the small things Americans are doing to take action like “pay[ing] for low-polluting or pollution-free products like low-sulfur heating oil, unleaded gasoline, and coal from fully reclaimed strip mines, for automobile emission controls, for electricity from cleaner fuels, and for more parklands and wildlife refuges” (Whitaker, 1988). Similarly, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) says, “Take the President's call to action - join your neighbors and United We Serve as people come together to plant trees, clean up a local river or many other Earth Day activities you can find above” (“Earth Day,” 2010).

These examples demonstrate the shift in agency from the institutional actors and actions of Earth Day 1970 to individual actors and actions in the present day. From Obama at the White House to Whitaker from NASA, official organizations suggest that not only is environmental change easily accomplished, it is done so at the local, community level where individuals do small things that add up to substantial results. This current frame is compared to the first Earth Day. Earth Day 1970 constituted institutional actors and actions which led to positive environmental improvement. Because the government is constituted as one whose environmental responsibility is fulfilled, it becomes incumbent on individuals to take action. The government does not ask much of us beyond a dedication to “make [our] local communities cleaner, healthier places” as Americans did forty years ago (“Earth Day,” 2010). Now individuals are guided by the official narrative to produce small environmental changes. The small actions required of individuals once again closes off other types of action, such as the activism promoted through the vernacular memory. The responsibility for change no longer lies at the
institutional level and, therefore, the official memory of Earth Day constitutes individuals doing small acts that do not affect institutions or the economy and that close off other possible types of action.

In addition, some of the government organizations argue that not only are Americans asked to make small changes; these are changes that will not affect jobs or the economy. For instance, President Obama contends that we should make efforts to improve our environments, but he reassures Americans that “we’ve [the administration] rejected the notion that we have to choose between creating jobs and a healthy environment because we know the economy of the 21st century will be built on infrastructure powered by clean energy” (2010). In a similar vein, EPA Administrator Jackson argues that the government can build a “clean energy economy that creates jobs” and “cleans up our environment” (n.d.).

While official memory constitutes individual actions as an easy transition that did not drastically change current human behaviors, vernacular memory creates individuals as activists and creates a greater sense of urgency in its story by explaining that the challenges facing the nation are far greater than those of 1970. Diverging from mainstream vernacular memory, radical vernacular memory emphasizes that while Earth Day might have brought about great changes in the decade following 1970 –the environmental exigencies we face today are more complex and urgent. Therefore, while the government portrays Earth Day as a continued success and leads individuals to action that does not harm the economy, radical environmental organizations offer alternative action in the form of activism.
World Wildlife Fund (WWF) develops this tone of urgency in its Earth Day message. The WWF does not spend a great deal of time developing a positive story about how far we have come like the official memory; instead, WWF argues that our problems continue. WWF argues, “Our planet is today under threat from a different kind of pollution” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). The WWF says, “Carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases are causing rapid changes in Earth’s climate that are already resulting in costly and dangerous impacts” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). These include harm to “water resources, energy supply and demand, transportation, agriculture, ecosystems, and health” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). WWF warns that the environment is headed toward disaster we do not “curb this pollution by switching to a clean energy economy” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). It might appear that WWF’s articulation of a clean energy economy parallels the official narrative; however, the WWF diverges from the official characterization of “clean energy” because it creates activists who push for legislation rather than individual actions that produce small changes, while also developing a greater sense of urgency about generating a clean energy economy.

The WWF uses the opportunity provided by remembrances of Earth Day to create individuals as activists who push for more comprehensive environmental action. WWF references the 40th Anniversary as a milestone and as a perfect time for people to “contact their Senators and ask them to pass clean energy and climate legislation this year” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.). Again, WWF does not ask that Americans take small steps in their own lives; rather WWF says as activists, individuals need to demand change from the government level and that change needs to happen this year. In the conclusion of the article, WWF creates a sense of urgency for more “environmental victories” employing
the past to demonstrate present concerns: “In raising our collective voices 40 years ago, we helped usher in a series of major environmental victories. Today, the stakes are even higher and our voices even more urgent” (“Earth Day 2010,” n.d.).

An article by Greenpeace also asserts that current environmental problems are far worse than in 1970 and that the problems we face today fall at a precipice or tipping point that creates an urgent need for change. Greenpeace argues,

Today, we face an environmental crisis of far greater, planetary proportions. Climate Chaos is already changing our world. Within the lifetimes of children being born today, it may challenge our survival as a species. Yet the response by governments and industry to date has been very late, and very little. (“Earth Day,” 2006)

Greenpeace creates a sense of urgency and even directly addresses the lack of urgency on the government/institution side. Greenpeace critiques the lack of leadership in environmental change initiatives, which creates the need for activist action. In the article, Greenpeace creates a sense of urgency by showing a clip of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* that offers a forecast of our environment if climate change is not rectified. And Greenpeace argues when introducing the embedded video, “If this is not scary enough for you, perhaps you'd like to see what your home or your favorite coastal town might look like in a few decades if we don't act now” (“This Earth Day,” 2009). This article not only points out the failure of a message where we only have to change a little over a long period of time, it also creates an urgent need for action.
While official memory imparts a message that Earth Day was a success, vernacular memory, in particular the radical vernacular memory explored above, challenges the official memory. From the perspective of government organizations, Earth Day has had staying power and has continued to remind Americans of what they must do to improve the environment. Furthermore, the official memory implies that Americans have to do very little to achieve environmental success, which constrains the types of actions Americans can adopt. On the other hand, radical vernacular memory realizes the deficiency in an argument that paints Earth Day as a continued success and does very little to create activists and to impress upon the public the urgency of environmental exigencies such as climate change. It is clear that when considering the efficacy of post-1970 Earth Day advances, the public memory of Earth Day is highly contested.

Conclusions

This analysis of the history of Earth Day highlights how public memories overlap and diverge in meaningful ways. The historical account of Earth Day 1970 as presented by both official and vernacular memories justifies the first Earth Day by highlighting a scene of visible pollution where institutional actors and actions were necessary to bring about environmental change. Therefore, Earth Day 1970 is remembered for its legislation. Following a historical account of the first Earth Day, official and vernacular memories define Earth Day after 1970. At this time, official and vernacular memories diverge and become in opposition to one-another. Official public memory draws from the historical narrative of institutional action in order to shift agency from the government to local people and communities. By emphasizing environmental success of clean air, water, and land made possible by legislative action, the government’s job in assisting with
environmental issues is no longer necessary. Therefore, the government can support the contemporary focus on the individual as actor. In opposition, radical vernacular memory contends that the government’s job in environmental legislative action is far from complete. Radical environmental groups continue to push for large-scale environmental action as they argue that environmental exigencies are far more urgent today than in 1970.

This chapter provides an understanding of the how official and vernacular memories constructed a story about Earth Day’s history. The next chapter turns to an exploration of how this narrative of Earth Day has been strategically employed to create particular subject positions that fulfill the Earth Day story. As highlighted in the next chapter, official and vernacular memories employ narrative identification in order to interpolate certain types of individuals that are directed toward particular actions that align with the interests of the group.
Chapter Three: The Transhistorical Subject

Public memories play an important role in the creation and maintenance of identification, which is inherent in the formation of public memory. Casey (2004) argues that common identities persist in public memory. Casey (2004) contends the constitutive rhetoric that develops in public memories establishes the identity of individuals and determines the relationship of those individuals to the larger culture. Furthermore, Schwartz and Heinrich (2004) posit that individuals “enhance their sense of responsibility as group members” because of the collective past shared in public memory (p. 118). Groups use common stories about past events to facilitate and sustain bonds between members of the group. Through the use of identification, official and vernacular memories of Earth Day function as a constitutive rhetoric that creates a collective subject into which individuals are interpolated.

The relationship between memory and identity, as well as the power of vernacular and official memories to maintain individual adherence to a specific socio-political order, makes it imperative to consider how identity can be used as an “ideological weapon” in the construction of public memory (Schudson, 1992, p. 52). According to Zelizer (1995), memory can be altered and revised. As a result, memory is a rhetorical battleground, which makes public memory inherently ideological because institutions and dispositions of power strategically shape the landscape of public memory (Browne, 1995; Wood, 1999). Wood (1999) claims that power is maintained through identification: “public memory – whatever its unconscious vicissitudes – testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past so that these will be embraced by individuals as their own” (p. 2).
The official memory of Earth Day strategically employs identification in order to maintain institutional control and power. Through constructing a common identity, institutional agencies have the ability to control what is remembered and forgotten about Earth Day and to guide individual action. By belonging to or identifying with the collective subject in the Earth Day story, individuals are required to maintain the consistency of the story, which is ultimately controlled by those with the power to construct the story of Earth Day. On the other hand, radical vernacular memory strategically employs identification as a contestation of official memory. Radical vernacular memory constructs a common identity of activists. Through identification, individuals are required to complete the narrative through activism.

Maurice Charland’s (1987) seminal work on constitutive rhetoric offers a framework for understanding the role of identification in directing audience behavior. According to Charland, all narratives are ideological because “they create the illusion of merely revealing a unified and unproblematic subjectivity” (1987, p. 139). Therefore, the “collective” or “people” exist only through an ideological discourse that constitutes them. Specifically, Charland (1987) identifies three ideological effects that demonstrate how narratives “constitute subjects as they present a particular textual position as the locus for action and experience (pgs. 138-139).

This chapter analyzes how official and vernacular memories have constituted a collective subject as they advance a particular public memory of Earth Day. This analysis highlights the complexity inherent in public memory by examining the contestation between and within official and vernacular memories in the creation of a collective subject. The official memory of Earth Day constitutes individuals as consumers. In this
frame, individuals have a choice to “pick” between green or non-green products. However, this choice is merely an illusion because either choice leads to more purchasing, thus promoting consumerism. The analysis, then, highlights how the vernacular memories have constituted particular subjects within their narratives. Vacillating between the official and radical vernacular memory, mainstream vernacular attempts to create an activist who is also a consumer. The radical vernacular, on the other hand, constitutes activists who demand large-scale change at the institutional level.

Subject as Consumer Citizen

By employing the memories of Earth Day to inculcate American values of individualism and capitalism, official memory successfully constitutes a collective subject of citizens who will fulfill these American ideals. These citizens identify with American ideals of individualism and capitalism that then shape the environmental actions they perform. In creating the collective subject through identification with American ideals, the government organizations are able to guide action in the material world.

The EPA Earth Day website is comprehensive and focuses on establishing the collective subject of its narrative as citizens doing their civic duty to protect the environment. This commitment to a vision of pro-environmental action is replicated within each of the three main sections: “Make a Commitment,” “Take Action,” and “Learn, Teach, Share.” In “Make a Commitment,” the viewer is asked to view videos produced for the “It’s My Environment” video contest as well as participating by creating their own video. The videos depict individuals performing small, simple tasks. In one video, a young boy stands next to a pile of hats, shoes, and clothes, and he says, “These
shoes are going to third-world countries instead of the landfill” (“It’s My Environment,” 2010). Another video shows a young boy and a young girl holding a live turkey. They say in unison, “It’s our environment; that’s why we eat local” (“It’s My Environment,” 2010). These videos demonstrate the commitment of everyday Americans to environmental action, and they narrow the scope of action to individual consumer-driven choices. Viewers are able to identify with the simple actions and the drive to make a difference by having a positive impact on the environment. Through identification with the actions of those depicted in these videos, the collective subject is comprised of consumer-oriented citizens that choose to be environmentally friendly through their purchases.

The “Take Action” section offers a broader range of content. Among the sub-sections on the “Take Action” page are “Pick 5,” “Join your community in an Earth Day activity,” “Find more events at Earthday.net,” “Volunteer to help America at Serve.gov,” and “Read more about taking action”. Each of these sub-sections link to other pages within the website or to external pages like Earth Day Network (earthday.gov) and the Corporation for National and Community Service (serve.gov). The “Pick 5” link takes us to the EPA campaign to “Pick 5 for the Environment.” According to EPA, this is “an international environmental connection effort” (“Pick 5,” n.d.). This webpage contains a slideshow of many things that Americans have “picked” such as recycling, cleaning garbage from public land, and making crocheted grocery bags from recycled plastic. These images detail the individual acts Americans can perform to positively change the environment. Also on the “Take Action” webpage, the EPA offers an interactive map of the U.S. where the viewer can click on the region in which they live in order to find out
what Earth Day activities they can participate in. In addition, this page contains information about what individuals can do for the environment while at “home, work, school, while shopping, in your community, and on the road” (“Take Action,” n.d.). Just like the “Make a Commitment” section, the “Take Action” section both constitutes and guides the collective subject to consumer-oriented action.

The final section on the EPA website is called “Learn, Teach, Share.” This section is where the video of Lisa Jackson speaking about Earth Day’s history is located. Jackson’s speech unifies the participants in the first Earth Day and those participating in contemporary Earth Day celebrations. For example, Jackson says, “At the time, people were understandably concerned about harmful pollution… So, they decided to take action” (n.d.). The decision to take action in the 1970s is mirrored in the call for action in the present: “We can literally change the world starting with service in our community… Help us – protect the places we live, work, and play…” (Jackson, n.d.).

On the White House Earth Day website, President Obama constitutes a collective American subject who embodies the roles of citizens as idealized in an elementary school civics lesson. For Obama, the true meaning of the environmental movement is the civic consciousness embodied there:

But the true story of the environmental movement… [is] about the citizens who’ve come together time and time again to demand cleaner air, healthier drinking water, and safer food. And who’ve demanded that their representatives in government hold polluters accountable. (2010)

Obama offers a vision of demands being presented to representatives that is stripped of the symbols of activism and reframed in the language of citizenship and accountability.
Such a vision strips away the anti-war sentiment and 1960s advocacy of the first Earth Day to create a civic subject. This civic subject is further constrained so that the practices of citizenship do not conflict with the mandates of contemporary capitalism. Obama’s speech defines environmental actions as individual action: “riding the bus or the subway to work, making your home more energy efficient, or organizing your neighbors to clean up a nearby park” (2010).

Like the first Earth Day, it is up to Americans to act on principles of individualism and capitalism in order to drive environmental success. However, Obama strategically constrains individual behavior in order to maintain a balance between economic progress and environmental sustainability. He says, “And we’ve rejected the notion that we have to choose between creating jobs and a healthy environment because we know that the economy of the 21st century will be built on infrastructure powered by clean energy” (2010). By guiding Americans to individualistic, consumer-driven action, the government can effectively tout environmental responsibility without disrupting economic viability.

Throughout the rest of the White House’s Earth Day website, individual behavior is strategically managed to ensure consumerism, such as the consumer actions described in “Tips for Going Green.” The collective subject, then, is constituted in a manner that allows for economic success above and beyond environmental change. Of the four different subsections located after Obama’s speech, “Tips for Going Green” exemplifies consumer action. “Tips for Going Green” demonstrates the small changes required of American citizens, which typically call for consumer behavior. The caption below the link asks viewers to “join other Americans across the country who are helping to protect
our planet’s air, water and other natural resources for future generations by making just a few small changes in your day to day life” (“Going Green,” n.d.). As part of the collective, individuals are responsible for making change happen and they can do this by performing actions such as “commit[ing] to five simple changes” (“Going Green,” n.d.). When the viewer clicks on this link, they are taken directly to the EPA “Pick 5 for the Environment” campaign, The webpage also offers additional tips for going green at home, at work, in your community, on the road, at the store, at school, and in the great outdoors that mirror the information provided on the EPA’s Earth Day website (“Going Green,” n.d.). For example, in the “Going Green in Your Community” section, viewers are guided to an EPA webpage that offers educational tools to prepare individuals for such things as learning about the community’s environmental health, preventing pollution, and managing waste (n.d.). The White House, by way of an EPA webpage, encourages the audience to take individual action by becoming educated about environmental concerns in the communities in which they live. It is left up to individual agency to choose to become informed about and to protect the communities they live in. “Going Green on the Road,” is another example that demonstrates the type of action individuals should adopt: Americans are led to the individual or private action of purchasing an energy-efficient vehicle (“Going Green on the Road,” n.d.). Through individual consumption, Americans can effectively become more environmentally responsible. In addition to “Going Green,” the other three sections of this website constitute the collective subject in the same way by prescribing actions that emphasize individualism and consumerism.
The Federal Energy Management Program’s (FEMP – part of the U.S. Department of Energy) Earth Day website constitutes the same collective subject as the other government organizations. This website reinforces the statements made in Obama’s speech, while providing a direct link to the video of his speech. By articulating what Obama said, FEMP also creates a collective subject of Americans coming together to produce environmental action: “The 2010 Earth Day theme asks us to make connections between our daily actions on an individual level and the health of our planet on a global level… Each of us can make small actions that collectively add up to big results” (“Earth Day 2011,” 2011).

By creating a narrative that employs identification, official memories of Earth Day interpolate individuals into a collective subject. In the message, a collective subject is constituted through identification, which serves to guide individuals to act out the narrative so they maintain adherence in the group. The action that has been described is individual action that requires simple, easy to perform tasks. It is important to highlight the power behind framing action through small, easily-achieved tasks that do not put undue pressure on economic progress. Specifically, by leading collective subjects to commit to marginal changes, often achieved through consumption, official memory is able to not only demonstrate the government’s commitment to environmental sustainability while deflecting attention away from the actions of businesses and the government. By deflecting attention away from the environmental actions of institutional agents, the official memory effectively balance environmental change and business innovation. In addition to protecting economic progress, framing the transhistorical subject as individuals who transcend the problems of their personal lives to commit to
collective environmental action, however marginal, places the responsibility for environmental progress on the American people not the government or corporations.

**Subject as Activist**

While the official memory has constituted an individualistic, consumer-driven citizen, the vernacular memory, in particular radical vernacular memory constitutes activists. Although both memories articulate Americans in an individualistic culture, the environmental organizations constitute audiences as activists. This section of the analysis examines how vernacular memory attempts to subvert official memory. The analysis highlights the difference between mainstream and radical vernacular memories by demonstrating that they each constitute different subjects. The mainstream vernacular memory of Earth Day creates an activist subject who is also a consumer. This highlights overlap between the official and mainstream vernacular memory. Differing from the mainstream vernacular, radical vernacular memory of Earth Day completely challenges the consumerist identity by creating activists subjects whose actions, in no way, involve the purchasing of products. Radical vernacular, unlike mainstream vernacular, is able to challenge institutions to produce large-scale action.

On its website, Earth Day Network (EDN) proposes a variety of ways individuals can get involved and become environmentally responsible. EDN’s narrative about individual action at first appears similar to official memory. The four main sections of the website are “Earth Day 2011,” “A Billion Acts of Green,” “Environmental Education,” and “What is Your Impact?”. The first section describes the theme for Earth Day 2011 and includes a list of campaign initiatives for 2011:
In recognition of the power of millions of individual actions, Earth Day 2011 will be organized around A Billion Acts of Green… A Billion Acts of Green inspires and rewards both simple individual acts and larger organizational initiatives that further the goal of measurably reducing carbon emissions and supporting sustainability. (“Earth Day 2011,” n.d.)

According to EDN, individuals can take action in their homes and in the organizations in which they work. They can come together to reach the goal, which EDN defines as reducing carbon emissions and promoting environmental sustainability. This example highlights the overlap between this narrative and the one created in the government websites. The individual is asked to perform simple, minimal actions.

The next section, “A Billion Acts of Green,” allows the viewer to pledge his/her own act of green. On this webpage there is a picture of two green hands, among several green hands made to look like a forest, that prop up one large sign that reads: “Pledge an Act, Save our Planet” and the accompanying caption adds: “Show your commitment to save the earth. Share your act of green” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). A second picture, available when the viewer clicks on the “2” icon in the bottom left-hand corner of the first picture, depicts the trunk of a tree which is made up of brown hands that become branches and the green leaves are made up of recycling signs, windmills, leaves, etc. The caption of this picture reads: “Help us reach our goal of One Billion Acts of Green” and in smaller font below the caption reads: “Contribute Today” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). To the right of this picture is a bar that offers the current count of acts of green, which indicates nearly 46 million pledged acts of green. Below the picture, the webpage offers details about some of the most recent pledges, which have been categorized into the following
groupings: “Green Schools and Education,” “Advocacy,” “Energy,” “Transportation,” “Sustainable Development,” “Conservation and Biodiversity,” “Recycling and Waste Reduction,” and “Water” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). While some of the categories might appear to be more policy based such as “Conservation” and “Development,” through the actual pledges in these categories, as well as the others, it is clear that the focus is on individual’s and their actions. For example, in the “Sustainable Development” category, one pledge says, “I pledge to teach people to plant and grow their own organic vegetables” (n.d.). A pledge from “Conservation and Biodiversity” says, “I pledge to eat local” (n.d.). By highlighting these examples, EDN articulates a collective subject that is individualistic and takes action through consumption. The campaign for “A Billion Acts of Green” guides the individual to commit to at least one act of green. Through a simple read of the many pledges, the individual is making small changes in their lives to promote environmental sustainability.

The third section, “Environmental Education,” brings the viewer to a webpage with a photograph of children working in the soil, presumably planting a garden. Below this photo, is a brief outline of what Environmental Education (EE) means to EDN:

EE increases knowledge and appreciation for the environment through hands-on exposure to the natural world, as well as fusing interdisciplinary knowledge of the natural world with core subject areas. This education and awareness strengthens the relationship between individuals and their surrounding environment to generate greater public awareness, concern and action towards environmental issues. Ultimately, EE programs seek to develop environmental literacy among all citizens by raising awareness of the environment and environmental
challenges, connecting people to the natural world that surrounds them, and promoting a more sustainable society. (“Environmental Education,” n.d.; emphasis mine)

According to EDN, environmental education is a core program in facilitating environmental awareness and sustainably practices. Notice the emphasis is on American citizens in this description. Through education, individuals, all citizens, people can be connected to the natural world so that they can understand how their actions effect the environment. The fourth section allows viewers to calculate their own personal footprint on the planet. By offering this activity, EDN reinforces the individual as the locus of environmental change. The individual needs to assess his/her footprint, so that they can see how much of an impact their daily choices have on the planet. In this way, EDN is again able to educate individuals and raise awareness about the impact of individuals’ daily activities on the environment.

Another component to the EDN website is its “Earth Day Television.” In addition to the other information already presented, EDN maintains a collection of all of EDN’s videos organized into a number of “channels”. The channels are as follows: “Global Warming,” “Get Active,” “Alternative Energy,” “Greener Living,” “Authors,” “In the Classroom,” and “Earth Day.” By choosing a channel, the viewer can have access to all of the videos that make up that category. The videos range from short clips that are a few minutes long to ones that run for more than 30 minutes. The videos on each of these channels pitch a message to the audience about the environmental change that needs to happen and all of the things that individuals in their own lives, in their communities, in their workplace, and in their role as citizens who vote and influence the nation to improve
the earth. For example, the videos on the “Greener Living” channel describe the choices individuals make that “affect our health and our environment” (n.d.). A brief paragraph description about the “Greener Living” channel suggests, “While we cannot reverse the clock, nor force change upon our neighbor, we can take our own steps toward greener living. We can reduce our energy use, drive less, buy greener products with less packaging, recycle and reuse” (n.d.). Another channel, “Get Active,” emphasizes the importance of “back[ing] up our opinions with action and set[ing] an example” (n.d.). The Earth Day channel emphasizes the billions of individuals that “now mark Earth Day… making it the largest secular event in the world” (“Get Active,” n.d.). The actual videos on this channel offer a look into some of the Earth Day celebrations that happen around the world. The highlights of the different Earth Day’s, both national and international, establish the collective subject as the individual that participates in Earth Day events and activities, but also does his/her part beyond Earth Day. These highlights of Earth Day celebrations offer evidence of the success of Earth Day because, as more individuals, communities, and cultures get involved, Earth Day continues to raise awareness and lead individuals to sustainable living.

EDN is not the only environmental organization that establishes the individual as the collective subject. World Wildlife Fund (WWF), PETA, and Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) all have similar constructions of the collective subject. Like EDN, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) is closely related to the government websites. However, EDF’s narrative constitutes a subject that becomes an activist. In a YouTube video by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), the collective subject is all Americans who are civically responsible. For example, in one part of the video, the images and
words constitute a collective subject that will facilitate the move to a clean energy economy. While the narrator speaks, different images appear on screen reinforcing the words he says:

Here’s what I know. We can invent a future that preserves our planet and unleashes a clean energy economy (a still shot of an old woman’s hands holding a plant). But while success is possible, it is not assured (shot of a man riding a bike, a woman on a scooter, and a man walking to work). We all have a role to play (image of solar panels). It will take creativity and inspiration (image of wind turbines) from all of us (video of protestors outside the White House). This Earth Day, let us confront the pessimism that paralyzes action (image of student in a lab). Let us tap the brightest minds (two men studying plants) urging Congress to give them the tools they need to reinvent our energy future… (“An Earth Day Message,” 2008)

The narration argues that the responsibility of change lies with all Americans who come together for the good of the environment. The use of inclusive language like “we” and “us” demonstrates that all Americans are responsible for environmental protection and sustainability. Later in the video, the narrator says, “We all have a role to play” (“An Earth Day Message,” 2008). This illustrates that all Americans have a stake in environmental issues and as such, they are responsible for ensuring that we meet the goal of a clean energy economy. While the text articulates that all Americans are part of the fight, the images place emphasis on the individual. The image of the man walking to work or the woman riding a scooter suggests that these individuals are doing their part as American citizens to participate in environmental action. Therefore, this excerpt shows
that the individual is responsible for his/her own actions, and as individuals, they will have to come together as a collective to make environmental change happen. In addition, this example demonstrates the type of action of the collective subject. By showing a video of protestors outside of the White House and by explaining that individuals have to urge “Congress to give them the tools they need to reinvent our energy future,” EDF is guiding the collective subject to behave like an activist (“An Earth Day Message,” 2008).

As activists, individuals would be willing to challenge Congress and the White House to demand legislative or regulatory action that promotes environmental responsibility and a clean energy economy.

The second video produced by EDF, also on YouTube, solidifies the constitution of a collective subject. Airing just before Earth Day 2009, this video is formatted like the previous video where the narration and the images reinforce one another. This video focuses more specifically on the issue of global warming. For example, the narration is accompanied with shots of polar bears in their habitats, a five-lane highway packed full of vehicles, and the smokestacks of a power plant spewing out smoke. These images are juxtaposed with shots of solar panels and wind turbines. These two types of images portray where the environment is now and where it should be headed – toward clean energy. By highlighting the disparity between what is and what should be, EDF is able to show a rift between marginal action of individuals and the large-scale action required to get to the goal of clean energy. The video, then, cuts to a video of Obama on C-SPAN asking Congress to pass legislation “that places a market based cap on carbon pollution and drives production of a renewable America” (“An Earth Day Message,” 2009).

Obama’s call to Congress is used for the EDF to call on Americans: “This year, we ask
Americans to support capping carbon by putting on their own carbon caps” (“An Earth Day Message,” 2009). These words are accompanied by images of different individuals wearing hats. For example, a girl in a cowboy hat is holding a sign that reads, Texans for Carbon Cap: Yes – We Do Indeed Exist (written on top of an image of the Texas state flag) (“An Earth Day Message,” 2009).

Throughout the rest of the video, the narrator is describing what a carbon cap would mean for the transformation of our nation’s energy economy. This description is accompanied with many more individuals wearing their own carbon hats. Toward the end of the video, the responsibility for change is clearly placed on individuals: “The future is up to us. Stand up! Educate your neighbors. Raise your voice. Change your life. And never give up for our children and our children’s children” (“An Earth Day Message,” 2009). Although the video offers a multitude of images of Americans putting on their carbon caps, this action can be seen as different from performing simple, minimal acts of green. EDF and the government narratives have the same goal of a clean energy economy, however, the behavior promoted in this video is activism. Rather than participating in the consumer culture and buying their way to becoming “green,” individuals are demonstrating support and raising awareness about the importance of a carbon cap. Putting on caps is not just an act of placing a hat on their heads, these individuals are explicating a major environmental problem that needs to be publicly supported to hold the government accountable.

For the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) the collective subject is the individual as activist. And this individual is articulated as one who demands action at the national level. WWF describes the collective subject as those individuals, as activists, who are
prepared to write to their Senators “and make them pass clean energy and climate legislation this year” (“Earth Day,” 2010). While the responsibility for action is at the individual level like official memory, WWF’s collective subject is an activist rather than an individual who commits marginal environmental actions. Like EDF and WWF, PETA argues that individuals need to speak out about their views. For example, in one PETA article that chronicles PETA’s activist efforts to demonstrate the importance of becoming an activist,

It’s easy and inexpensive to host a booth at an Earth Day event or at other environment fairs and festivals throughout the year. But for those who don’t have time to organize a booth or can’t rustle up volunteers to help, it’s even easier to order some literature from PETA and just stand on a street corner and hand them out yourself. If you’re too shy for that, you can always wear a T-shirt or a button with a message on it, and you’ll be spreading awareness without even trying! We can all make Earth Day about more than just switching off your lights. We can make it about being truly green by eating green. Now imagine if each one of us was out there spreading awareness … we would change the world. (“PETA Spreads Awareness,” 2010)

In this extended example, it is clear that the collective subject constituted in this narrative is the individual. However, the narrative serves to mold the collective subject into activists who are willing to stand on street corners or wear buttons that promote their beliefs. PETA’s website constitutes its audience as individuals who believe that they should, or actually do, eat green in their lives. These individuals who have been
constituted as the collective subject through identification are, then, guided to transcend their own lives and help others by raising awareness through activist efforts.

During the analysis of the environmental organizations, it became clear that the mainstream vernacular website with the most Earth Day content, EDN, had failed to successfully interpolate individuals as activists. While EDF, WWF, and PETA were able to interpolate individuals through identifying with wanting a clean energy economy and by constituting a collective subject, these three groups constructed a narrative conclusion that positioned the collective subject as activists, EDN was not able to do this because it placed a heavy emphasis on behaviors that guide individuals to produce small changes at the individual level. The EDN narrative never moved beyond promoting small, easily-accomplished changes. The four main sections: “Earth Day 2011,” “A Billion Acts of Green,” “Environmental Education,” and “What is your Impact,” emphasize the individual with a narrative conclusion of small actions. For example, the A Billion Acts of Green campaign, which is one of the most prominent parts of the website, focuses on individuals committing to at least one act of green. Through identifying with the acts of green such as not driving to work or not eating meat, the individual is successfully interpolated. However, the constituted collective subject is now constrained to fulfill this narrative rather than a narrative that concludes with activist action. The collective subject for EDN becomes strikingly similar to the official collective subject because EDN fails to position the narrative with a conclusion that guides individuals to become activists.

While EDF, WWF, and PETA all attempted to constitute a collective subject that took activist action, Greenpeace, part of the radical vernacular memory, offers a more explicit emphasis on activism. In fact, the collective subject that Greenpeace creates is
somewhat different than the others because from the beginning of its narrative through its conclusion, Greenpeace is able to interpolate individuals that are concerned with activism that promotes environmental responsibility, not just on Earth Day, but every single day. Greenpeace wants individuals to show the government that they are not going to allow corporate buyout of politicians. While mainstream vernacular memory demonstrates what type of behavior they want from the individual, radical vernacular memory goes a step further by actually offering a reason why individual action must be directed toward Washington. Greenpeace effectively illustrates the difference between official memory and the constituted collective subject that guides actions in a way that is harmless to institutional prosperity and the actions required to actually produce large-scale environmental change.

The collective subject offered by Greenpeace is most clearly developed in two articles and two videos. The first article, a feature story in April, 2006, argues that the individual must recognize how important environmental legislation is:

This Earth Day, we all need to pledge to do more to get this issue to the top of the agenda for governments and industries around the world. Read up, speak out. If your politician doesn't act on global warming - vote for someone else who will.

(“Earth Day,” 2006)

In this example, Greenpeace guides the individual beyond just doing his/her part at home or work to demonstrating the importance of advocating for environmental legislation and choosing politicians who are interested in creating that legislation. The second feature story entitled, “This Earth Day Become a Climate Activist,” is another example of the “role” Americans should play in environmental responsibility. In the introduction of this
Greenpeace highlights the actions taken by Greenpeace activists from the inception of the organization. Greenpeace says,

We've had three decades of experience in making the impossible happen -- an end to nuclear testing, protection of Antarctica from oil and gas exploration, a moratorium on commercial whaling, a ban on ocean dumping and a ban on trade in toxic waste, to name only a few. (“This Earth Day,” 2009)

Through this example, Greenpeace is able to constitute a transhistorical subject. This narrative construction allows Greenpeace to interpolate new individuals that can identify with these great activist achievements. By explaining the kind of action individuals involved in Greenpeace have taken, it is clear that Greenpeace is not interested in individuals recycling their trash; they are invested in making change at the national level through regulation of corporations and legislation to stop environmental degradation. An image that accompanies the article solidifies the type of action Greenpeace takes. The image is of a person in a blue jacket with the Greenpeace logo and his hands are cuffed behind his back. This image illustrates the lengths to which Greenpeace activists have gone and will continue to go in order to incite environmental change.

After the introduction that illustrates Greenpeace’s activism, the article focuses on present concerns. Under the heading “Our best chance to make a difference,” Greenpeace describes what individuals must do:

When the UN Climate summit convenes in Copenhagen this December, delegates there will be deciding the fate of the Earth. It's looking more and more likely they will bring us a lot of hot air, not a cooler planet. YOU need to tell them that’s not good enough. YOU need to raise the bar on the world's expectations. Our first
mission is to get the message out that we want our leaders to take personal responsibility for stopping climate change. The first step to ensuring that the climate summit makes real decision is to make sure that real decision makers are there. (“This Earth Day,” 2009)

Greenpeace does believe that it is up to individuals to take action, but this article does not ask individuals to take action in their homes, the action requested by Greenpeace is for national and international individuals to speak to their leaders and get them to take “personal responsibility.” The final action asked of individuals at the end of this article is to “Demand key leaders go to the climate summit” by signing the petition (“This Earth Day,” 2009). Through this article, Greenpeace successfully constructs a narrative conclusion that guides individuals to activist action that demands large-scale change at the institutional level. Greenpeace clearly recognizes that individuals cannot achieve the change necessary if they become subjects of the official government narrative, rather Greenpeace wants individuals to become activists. Greenpeace is also able to move beyond EDF, WWF, and PETA because this article does not focus on Earth Day specifically and it offers a much more extensive explanation of the type of action required of individuals.

Two Greenpeace videos from Greenpeace highlight Greenpeace’s attempt to move away from the dominant view of individual behaviors. The first video, “Inspiring Action” (2010) illustrates what Greenpeace has done and is doing to raise awareness about corporate driven environmental degradation. The music and the images combine to make a powerful statement about the environment. This video raises questions about what people are doing to save the earth by demonstrating the great lengths Greenpeace
activists have gone to ensure that corporations and economic enterprises are held accountable for their actions. The second video diverges slightly from the first and from the two articles by Greenpeace. The video, “Give Earth A Hand,” demonstrates the tension between consumer driven behaviors and positive environmental change. Greenpeace still attempts to drive individual behavior, but the message is focused on raising consciousness to show individuals that what they do on a day-to-day basis will not lead, as the dominant construction would like us to believe, to a more sustainable future.

Greenpeace’s “Inspiring Action” YouTube video illustrates the necessity of action that moves beyond individual behavior change to assessing the environmental progress or lack of progress of corporations and economic enterprises. Unlike the official narrative, Greenpeace believes individuals must take action at the national and international level moving out of the comfort of changing small things in their personal lives and into activism that directly questions the dominant assumptions inherent in consumption. Some of the prominent examples in the video are when Greenpeace calls attention to the practices of whaling and logging. The video introduces the issue of whaling by showing an intimate view of a whale being harpooned. The viewer can see the whale struggling to break free, but in the next shot the viewer can see that it did not break free as the video shows the whale being reeled in and lifted on to the ship. At this point, the audience has to encounter the disgusting shot of the whale’s intestines falling out as it is pulled up to the ship’s deck. The viewer then sees the helpless whale lying on the deck of the ship. Later in the video, Greenpeace activists are shown in inflatable boats driving alongside a whaling vessel attempting to disrupt the whaling practices. The activists actually board the ship. And at the end of this scene, the viewer sees the harsh reality of activists who
are risking their lives to take action against the economic enterprise of the whaling industry.

Another prominent example in the video is showing the atrocities of logging. The shot first cuts to a close up of a tree being cut down and falling to the forest floor. Following this, the video shows dead animals to demonstrate the loss of habitat as a result of logging. Greenpeace also shows the empty land devoid of any trees from an aerial perspective and the run-off that occurs when there are no trees there to hold the soil in place. Finally, the video shows a wall of children’s drawings and cuts to a close up of a child’s depiction of logging. The drawing is of a tree in the foreground that is crying and pleading to the viewer. In the background of the picture, the tree is surrounded by stumps where other trees used to live.

At the end of the “Inspiring Action” video, Greenpeace leaves the viewer with the following statements: “The fragile earth needs a voice. It needs solutions. It needs change. It needs action” (2010). The purpose of the video is to “inspire” the viewer to be critical of consumption as it leads to the devastation of the earth and its resources. Through identification with wanting to change environmental travesties highlighted in the video, Greenpeace interpolates viewers into a collective subject that behaves as an activist who is willing to risk his/her life to fight for the large-scale change that is necessary. This role that Greenpeace hopes individuals will assume differs from the official collective subject. Greenpeace is not asking individuals to use less electricity or to use less paper, Greenpeace is asking individuals to call into question their everyday actions and to realize that they cannot make small adjustments to their lives and feel like they’ve contributed; the action Greenpeace is asking for is to hold institutions
accountable for the destruction of the environment. Therefore, while the responsibility might still be on the individual, the type of action required of individuals is far different from the action required in the official construction.

The second video from Greenpeace entitled “Give Earth A Hand,” moves away from proscribing individual action, rather the video illuminates the tension between buying behaviors and environmental responsibility. The video attempts to raise individual consciousness that people cannot have everything they want. In fact, the video demonstrates that if we want big cars or other material possessions, we will not be able to reach for or even maintain a clean energy economy. The video is made up of a series of hands that play a large role in formulating the visual argument. Included with the images are brief captions/phrases that add to and reinforce the message. The first half of the video consists of a series of digitized or analogue type images that flashed across the screen like green neon signs. Each of the images is accompanied by the words “I want.” The images consisted of various types of material goods and possessions that our culture strives for, such as, a money sign, a car, an SUV, shoes, furniture, a boat, a trophy. As the video progresses the pictures begin to change more rapidly and the music gains intensity. The words and images flash before the viewer’s eyes until a collection of these signs/images appears clustered in the middle of the screen. The screen begins to fill up with more and more signs. The next shot employs human hands reaching toward these same glowing signs. The collection of hands are reaching and grasping toward these items like claws trying to get ahold of the next best thing. Each of these images references some type of cultural desire and connotes the drive for consumption. Suddenly, the music changes and becomes almost serene. A hand appears to be reaching,
like before, but this time it is reaching for the words “I want clean air” which are no longer in green, but are written in a soft white. As others begin to raise their hands, the scene becomes what looks like a wheat field blowing in the wind. The caption reads: “I want food.” As the hands continue to sway in the breeze the caption changes to, “I want food without destruction.” The video progresses like this as the hands grouped together morph into images of water, a forest, and even the frozen ocean. As the hands change colors and morph into these different landscapes, the captions describe the “want” that goes along with the image: “I want water without pollution,” “I want our rainforests intact” and “I want to keep our oceans alive and our polar seas pristine” (Give Earth A Hand, 2010). And the final caption reads: “I want an energy revolution” as the hands become the blades of a wind turbine spinning out and morphing into a picture of the globe (Give Earth A Hand, 2010). As the screen becomes black, the final words appear asking the viewer to “give Earth a hand” (Give Earth A Hand, 2010).

This video sets up a polarization between the material items individuals in a consumer culture crave and the environmental change they want to be made. By calling our attention to the antithetical nature of these two claims, Greenpeace is able to make individuals aware of the lack of harmony between consumptive behaviors and environmental sustainability. Wanting items such as gas guzzling SUVs or the newest electronic device is far from creating an energy revolution. Greenpeace wants people to realize that they cannot have both. We cannot have the newest gadgets and we have to realize that through our purchasing habits we are fueling institutions that do not care about the environment. So, Greenpeace is trying to show how environmental
sustainability and consumerism are opposing. In the end, the audience is asked to set aside their material wants and, instead, give the earth a hand.

Another environmental activist group that comprises the radical vernacular memory, Earth First!, produced an article that calls attention to the fact that the small, insignificant action proscribed by official memory is absurd. Earth First! parodies some of the activities prescribed through the official collective subject to reveal how much of a joke it is to ask Americans to do “the small things” on Earth Day. Therefore, Earth First! has created a counter-message that makes fun of the way in which the government and other organizations asks so little of Americans. Earth First! wrote an article entitled: “10 Things NOT to do on Earth Day”. Earth First! argues, “We could yap to you all day about things you SHOULD do on Earth Day – like planting trees, attending an Earth Day Brainwashing Festival and cleaning up litter in your neighborhood– but you already know all that” (“Things Not to Do,” n.d.). Instead, Earth First! offers a list of 10 things not to do on Earth Day from founder and CEO of Big Green Purse, Diane MacEachern. This humorous amalgam of what not to do lists items like “don’t drive like a teenager”, “don’t use cleansers and personal care products that contain triclosan”, “don’t go shopping without a list!”, “don’t leave the lights on when you leave the room”, “don’t sit at your computer all day”, etc. (“Things Not to Do,” n.d.). This article leads the viewer to another article about things not to do on Earth Day written by Olivia Zaleski from the Huffington Post. Some of the items on her “not to do” list are: do not “use your leaf blower to dust off the driveway”, “feed a cow beans”, “hold your breath… all day”, “buy a polar bear fur coat”, “bundle up a large wad of toilet paper and double flush”, etc. (“What Not to Do,” 2008). In addition, these lists are accompanied with images. The
Earth First! article begins with a screen shot of a South Park episode that spoofs Earth Day. Zelski’s article has a picture with each of the 10 items she lists. For example the one about not feeding a cow beans shows a cartoon illustration of a cow who is passing gas or the wad of toilet paper example has a picture of a toilet paper roll with George W. Bush on it. By making fun of the things individuals are asked to do on Earth Day, Earth First! is able to highlight the weakness in the dominant construction. Earth First! wants individuals to realize that the behaviors asked of them by many groups on Earth Day are insignificant in the grand scheme of environmental change. While the dominant view would have us believing that small changes can add up to major results, Earth First! shows individuals that small changes really add up to nothing.

Conclusions

Through the use of narrative, official and vernacular memories constituted a transhistorical subject that served their particular interests: Official memory strategically created subjects compliant with the American ideals of capitalism and individualism and vernacular memory led subjects toward activism. This analysis highlights the complexity inherent in the contestation of the public memory of Earth Day. It is clear that while all of the government organizations are captured within one iteration of official memory, the environmental organizations comprise two iterations of vernacular memory: mainstream vernacular and radical vernacular. Therefore, contestation of public memory becomes multifaceted as the various memories of Earth Day create and guide subject positions toward actions that serve their interests. This analysis shows that official memory of Earth Day created subject positions comprised of individuals whose actions did not interfere with or disrupt economic viability. While vernacular memory did display a
transhistorical subject of individuals, the behavioral outcomes differed from official memory. Both mainstream and radical vernacular memories deployed a narrative that had an activist outcome. However, one mainstream environmental organization, EDN, illustrated a great deal of overlap with official memory failing to guide individuals to activism. This is problematic for EDN because in guiding subjects to commit to small, individualized action, EDN’s narrative mirrors and reinforces the ideological structure of the official memory. In addition, while mainstream and vernacular memories emphasized the individual as activist, radical memory moved beyond the activities of Earth Day to require of individuals activism that confronts institutions and demands large-scale environmental change.

This chapter provides an understanding of how, through narrative identification, individuals adopt subject positions that are directed toward a particular action. Therefore, the interpolation of individuals within official and vernacular memories of Earth Day is a rhetorical strategy that allows particular identities to be formed. As highlighted in the next chapter, the contestation over public memory of Earth Day continues as official memory advances a consumerist identity that promotes the purchasing of green products and vernacular memory that attempts to subvert the dominant identity of consumerism by offering an activist identity as an alternative.
Chapter Four: Institutional Control and the Ideology of Consumerism

Through its depiction of Earth Day’s history and the creation of a consumer-oriented collective subject, official memory has been able manage environmental change so that while individuals appear to have the freedom of choice, the collective subject crafted by government organizations contains that action through consumerism. This narrative allows the government to constrain the pro-environmental behaviors of individuals who identify with and wish to fulfill the roles constituted in institutional memories of Earth Day. By limiting choice to consumer behaviors, official memory balances environmental sustainability and economic progress. On the other hand, vernacular memory attempts to subvert the official narrative by providing alternative memories of Earth Day. Contestation occurs within vernacular memory as mainstream vernacular memory attempts to subvert, but at times actually aligns with official memory and radical vernacular memory completely challenges official memory by creating an activist identity. As the analysis highlights, vernacular memory is diverse and has multiple competing public memories of Earth Day as mainstream vernacular and radical vernacular memories negotiate which elements from the past are important for carrying on the story of Earth Day from an environmentalist perspective.

Official memory has constructed a narrative that creates the illusion of freedom, which serves to appropriate environmental discourse in order to promote consumer lifestyles. Remarking on the illusion of choice, Greider (2003) says that American “consumers are in a weak position and have very little actual leverage over the content of what they buy or how it is produced” (p. 10). Corbett (2006) offers a similar argument when she talks about the concept of the “buyosphere.” Corbett (2006) argues that the
Buyosphere is the physical and virtual place in which individuals establish their identity. More importantly, Corbett highlights “that this ‘buyosphere’ is not a civic space, for individuals in a society with an all-powerful marketplace behave more like a nation of consumers than a nation of citizens” (2006, p. 94). Like Greider, Corbett posits that individuals do not have choices beyond the consumption of goods. The choice lies in the type of product an individual can purchase in the buyosphere, but the choice is always one of consumption. Since consumption has become the primary way we construct our identity it becomes imperative to examine the role of power and control in maintaining the ideology of consumer culture.

In addition, scholars must understand how vernacular memories might be able to gain a voice in the public sphere by offering a broader, inclusive story and alternative choices to individuals that differs from official memory. In their study of alternative food activism in the U.S., Click and Ridberg (2010) contend that alternative food activists have relied too readily upon the individualist consumer choices inherent in a capitalist society. They argue, “This focus on the individual, instead of collective, action has opened food activism to critiques that it is too focused on consumer politics and lacks the force necessary to make substantive changes in the global food system” (Click & Ridberg, 2010, p. 304). The challenge for counter-publics or vernacular memories is to offer an alternative to the consumer culture. Click and Ridberg (2010) posit that in order “to subvert the capitalist logic of the global agro-food industry,” activists must move away from individualistic, consumer-oriented politics” (p. 316). In messages about Earth Day, some environmental groups within mainstream vernacular memories have framed environmental action in terms of consumer choice. Yet, other organizations within
mainstream vernacular memory have greater connection and overlap with radical vernacular memory. Finally, radical vernacular memory moves beyond mainstream vernacular memory and challenges the limited environmentalism available through consumerism by emphasizing individual choices that create a space for collective activist action and large-scale change.

The issue of choice, as negotiated by official and vernacular memories of Earth Day, is significant because it highlights issues of power and authority in the creation of public memory. Power and authority are important to public memory scholars because “public memory… testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past so that these will be embraced by individuals as their own” (Wood, 1992, p. 2). While official memory functions within the dominant consumer culture by creating a public memory that facilitates and guides consumer-driven action, the vernacular memory also works to challenge the official memory and create one of its own.

**Promoting Consumerism**

Official memory has constructed a public memory of Earth Day that is consistent with the capitalist system in which it was created. In order to demonstrate environmental responsibility while simultaneously promoting consumerism, the government has constructed a story of Earth Day that constitutes a consumer identity. Official memory deploys a certain environmental or “green” lifestyle, which involves particular behaviors that allow individuals to identify with and become part of the group. Individuals are interpolated by their identification with the “green” lifestyle constituted in the official memory of Earth Day by the illusion of choice. This choice is a ruse as the official
memory constrains individuals to purely consumer choices. To identify with the narrative and to become environmentally friendly, individuals need to purchase particular products. In controlling individuals by offering the singular choice of consumption, responsibility and attention is placed at the individual level and broader, systematic actions are inhibited. Through close examination of the government websites, it becomes clear that the official memory functions to preserve the status quo, one where individuals continue to consume and economic progress is advanced.

The EPA Earth Day website contains several examples of the action prescribed by official memory. The “Green Tips Podcasts” create the illusion of choice by highlighting some of the ways individuals who want to live “green” can make changes to their lives. For example, there are currently thirty-one “green tips” offered by the EPA. All of these tips, from reducing your carbon footprint by driving less and combining trips to booking environmentally conscious hotels on vacations, create the appearance of a broad range of choices for the individual. However, a closer look at the language of these “green tips” indicates that these options are limited to a consumer lifestyle defined as “buying green.” For example, tip number seven explains:

Be sensible! The Earth might seem like it has abundant water, but in fact only one percent of all water on the planet is available for humans. Buy fixtures and products that are water efficient – you can use less water to get the same job done just as well. When you go shopping, look for the WaterSense label to find water efficient products… (“Green Tips,” 2011)

The EPA guides individuals toward pro-environmental consumption by helping them identify water-efficient products. Tip number seventeen also focuses on consumption:
Make your home an Energy Star! When you do home maintenance, also do a home energy audit to find out how you can save money by making your home more energy efficient. And if every American home replaced just one conventional light bulb with a compact fluorescent light bulb, we would save enough energy to light more than 3 million homes a year. (“Green Tips,” 2011)

In this example, individuals are expected to conduct an energy audit, which may require hiring an expert, and they are to replace their light bulbs with energy efficient ones. The underlying theme of all the EPA’s suggestions is consumption: To be environmentally friendly, individuals need to purchase certain products.

The EPA also offers green tips specifically related to buying products. The webpage entitled “While Shopping” follows with a series of questions: “How can I buy energy-efficient products? How do I find the most fuel-efficient vehicle? How do I find products and services that save water? How can I buy safer detergents and household cleaners?” (“While Shopping,” 2011). The EPA answers each of the posed questions with advice for the consumer on how to purchase and live “green,” which promotes a “green” lifestyle that the collective subject must adopt in order to establish a “green” identity. In this example, the EPA is placed in a position of power and authority: As an expert on environmental issues, the EPA is a knowledgeable adviser on how to buy the products that will make individuals more environmentally responsible people.

EPA’s “It’s My Environment Video Project” and videos from “Pick 5 for the Environment” also exemplify a consumerist identity. The videos in the “It’s My Environment Video Project” highlight the types of choices individuals have. For example, in one video, a young boy and a young girl are holding a chicken announce as
they announce that it is “our environment because we buy local” (“It’s My Environment,” 2010). Here, environmentalism is defined by purchasing food locally. Tips like these demonstrate that individuals become environmentally friendly through the purchase of “green” products. The “Pick 5 for the Environment” section of the website also promotes the illusion of freedom central to consumerism. Within this “Pick 5” section are several videos that reinforce the goal of the campaign. The video entitled, “Make Saving Energy Part of Your Pick 5,” follows two sisters around the house as they replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs. When their father inquires what they are doing, one daughter replies, “Changing over to CFO’s. Did you know they’re much more efficient?” (“Saving Energy,” 2010). The father is impressed by the initiative his daughters took to become more environmentally responsible. The video demonstrates how environmentally responsible individuals are educated consumers. They know the range of products available to them, and they choose to buy the “green” products instead of others. While the EPA appears to allow individuals to choose to adopt a “green” lifestyle, the end result is that the individuals continue to consume, which sustains economic progress.

The White House’s Earth Day website prescribes a similar course of action. Like the EPA, the White House promotes consumerism under the guise of freedom of choice. The White House’s Earth Day webpage even contains direct links to some of EPA’s tips for going green such as “While Shopping” tips described above. Beyond this, the website provides an entire section of “Tips for Going Green.” The ways in which individuals can go green “at home, at work, in the community, on the road, at the store, at school, and in the outdoors” are identified. Of the other segments on the “Going Green” webpage, all of
the “tips” offered by the White House creates an illusion that the individual can minimal changes in their lives and be environmentally friendly. Official memory employs this narrative in order to lead the collective subject toward consumer-driven actions. The last tip provided by the White House, “Going Green in the Great Outdoors,” advances tourism as another consumer choice. As Corbett (2006) says, “Outdoor recreation is a multi-billion-dollar industry that sells lifestyle as much as it sells goods” (p. 109). The caption under this section reads: “America’s great outdoors offer plenty of opportunities to enjoy our natural environment. From hunting and fishing to hiking and camping, getting outside and active is a great way appreciate the world we live in” (“Going Green,” 2011). The individual is encouraged to explore the great outdoors and to take full advantage of the recreation marketplace. As tourists and explorers, individuals will have to book reservations for camping or hotels, drive to the different national parks, pay national park fees, and finally exploit the land for entertainment. As one tip suggests, our “National Parks Service preserves, unimpaired, the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations” (“Going Green,” 2011). The language here is key; the White House says that the preservation of nature, primarily achieved through National Parks, is solely for human entertainment and enjoyment. Exploring the Great Outdoors is described as another opportunity for individuals to become more environmentally friendly by acquainting themselves with nature (“Great Outdoors,” 2011). An emphasis is placed on the need for individuals to reconnect with or rediscover nature. However, the land is described as there for human enjoyment, which solidifies a human-nature divide where humans have control over nature and the environment. Therefore, rather than
reconnecting with nature, individuals are driven further away through anthropocentric and, as Corbett (2006) notes, consumer behaviors.

The Federal Energy Management Program (FEMP), part of the U.S. Department of Energy, uses the same strategy as the “Pick 5” program from the EPA. Although the FEMP does not provide specific information such as green tips, the website offers a synopsis of the actions required of individuals that identify with a “green” lifestyle. The FEMP says:

*Don't wait.* You have the power to turn awareness into action with simple things you do every day. Turn what you already know into real energy savings.

*Start with your own actions.* Look for ways to increase energy efficiency and performance in the office, at home, and on the road. What daily actions can you take to generate results?

*Encourage others to take action.* Do your part and connect with others. A small group working together (in your office, on your floor, in your building) can have a big impact at your agency. Turn your words into actions, and turn your actions into savings. Lead by example to save energy during your commute, in your office, and with your purchasing power. Taken as a whole, all of these individual actions stimulate advanced technologies, put America ahead in the global energy economy, and create new jobs right here at home. (“Earth Day 2011,” 2011)

This excerpt from the FEMP Earth Day website creates the illusion that individuals have power to. Because they hold the power, it is up to individuals to make the necessary changes to adopt a “green” lifestyle. In the latter part of this example, FEMP explicitly says, “Lead by example… with your purchasing power” (“Earth Day 2011,” 2011). Not
only does FEMP create the illusion of choice by demonstrating the power of individual choice and individual action, the website also directs individuals to purchase the “correct” products that will make their lives, at home and work, more energy efficient and environmentally friendly. The official public memory of Earth Day describes the audience as citizens who have the ultimate power to choose. However, this is only an illusion of power as the narrative has already ended with individual action that involves the purchase of “green” goods and services. Therefore, the path for individuals has already been laid out – it is a path that leads to the ultimate official goal of consumption.

**Promoting Activism**

The vernacular public memory of Earth Day has also constituted a collective subject of individuals; however, the action proscribed in the vernacular narrative diverges from and attempts to subvert the official story of Earth Day. While the official memory encourages individuals to act through consumption, the vernacular memory in some mainstream and all radical vernacular memories encourages individuals to civic engagement and activism. However, some environmental groups within the mainstream vernacular memory have offered public memories that also encourage a consumerist identity. Environmental organizations that are part of radical vernacular memory have recognized this failure of other environmental groups and incorporated it into their narratives about Earth Day.

Earth Day Network (EDN) attempts to lead individuals to make choices that promote sustainable living. Unlike the official memory of Earth Day, EDN does not emphasize consumer-type choices. Rather, in campaigns such as “A Billion Acts of Green,” EDN wants individuals to become activists, even if it is on a small scale. On the
“Billion Acts of Green” webpage, the audience can make pledges and view the types of pledges made by others. The pledges are broken up into eight categories: “Green Schools & Education, Advocacy, Energy, Transportation, Sustainable Development, Conservation & Biodiversity, Recycling & Waste Reduction, and Water” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). An example of a pledge from the “Green Schools & Education” articulates, “I will do/create awareness in school children about environment and energy value” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). The “Advocacy” pledges range from asking a clergy to give an Earth Day sermon to organizing a letter-writing campaign to save the Clean Air Act (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). Pledges in the “Energy” category contains some consumer-type behaviors such as switching to energy efficient light bulbs, however, the majority of the “Energy” pledges have nothing to do with purchasing products: “I pledge to wash all of my clothes in cold water; I pledge to use a clothesline whenever possible; I pledge to turn down the heat in the house every night; I pledge to take advantage of natural light as much as possible” (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). On the surface level, the actions of individuals appear to be much like those in official memory because individuals are taking minimal action. However, there is no underlying theme of consumption inherent in these actions. EDN demonstrates the wide range of choices individuals have, many of which exist outside the boundaries of consumer-action. For example, individual behavior such as hanging clothes on the line, taking advantage of natural light, or educating children about the environment do not involve consumerism. Through the campaign, EDN is raising environmental consciousness and leading people to become environmental activists even if it is only at the local level. In some of the pledges, individuals have declared that they will adopt an eco-lifestyle through the purchase of products such as energy-efficient vehicles, buying
local or organic, purchasing energy-efficient appliances, or buying compact fluorescents (“Billion Acts,” n.d.). These consumer-driven actions align with the official culture’s promotion of consumption, yet these behaviors are only one part of the range of behaviors promoted by EDN.

Among other campaigns established by EDN are “Women and the Green Economy (WAGE)” and “National Civic Education Project (NCEP).” These two campaigns demonstrate what EDN is doing to promote environmental responsibility and sustainability. The WAGE campaign counters the official narrative of Earth Day by emphasizing large-scale change through political action: “Our goal is to create a policy agenda for Rio+20 and generate relevant national initiatives that will promote the green economy, secure educational and job training opportunities for women and channel green investment to benefit women” (WAGE, n.d.). Like WAGE, the NCEP project serves as a great example of the activism EDN wishes to instill in individuals:

Earth Day Network strongly believes in creating personal responsibility for the environment among students around the world to promote a more democratically active citizenry. Working from the ground up, the NCEP empowers selected teachers and students to remedy specific environmental concerns in their communities with demonstrable outcomes and results. (NCEP, n.d.)

EDN constructs a story that emphasizes environmental education as imperative to ensure “a more democratically active citizenry” (NCEP, n.d.). The activism described by EDN through WAGE and NCEP combats the official culture’s constitution of a consumer identity.
While EDN tries to break away from the official memory through campaigns such as “A Billion Acts of Green,” “Women and the Green Economy (WAGE),” and “National Civic Education Project (NCEP),” other actions advocated by the EDN recapitulate the consumerist perspective of the official public memory. In a video entitled “Athletes for the Earth,” various world-class and Olympic athletes from around the world explain to the audience what they do to become “green.” For example, one athlete says that she buys local food (“Athletes for Earth,” 2010). Another says that he only uses natural cleaning products in his home (“Athletes for Earth,” 2010). Another says that she drives a hybrid car (“Athletes for Earth,” 2010). These actions combined with walking to campus and riding bike instead of driving a car make it difficult to differentiate EDN’s story from the official one. This campaign, strategically constructed by EDN, blurs the lines between the official and vernacular memory. The actions described in the video present viewers with several choices, but they emphasize purchasing environmentally friendly products.

The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) encourages individuals to become conservationists. By advocating for conservation, the EDF has provided an alternative type of action that serves to challenge consumerism. On the website, viewers are asked to “support conservation efforts by doing [their] part to help preserve our world's air, water and precious habitats” (“Celebrating Our World,” 2003). The website then offers pro-conservation actions such as “recycling tips; volunteer in your community; shop at environmentally-friendly businesses; plant a tree; know your local toxins; find out about water hazards; Great American Cleanup; use less energy; pollute less; spread the word” (“Celebrating Our World,” 2003). The activities advised by EDF uphold conservation
principles. For example, in the “recycling tips,” EDF tells the audience, “Cut down the household waste you throw away by composting, nature's way of recycling!” (“Celebrating Our World,” 2003). Or in the “use less energy,” EDF says, “You'll cut your electricity bill and help reduce greenhouse gases produced by power plants” (“Celebrating Our World,” 2003). The EDF website also educates the viewer on the principles of conservation by talking about the work of famed conservationist Aldo Leopold. EDF challenges consumerism by offering an alternative choice—conservation as a way of life—to viewers of their webpage.

Similar to the other environmental organizations, a PETA article articulates specific ways in which individuals can become activists:

It's easy and inexpensive to host a booth at an Earth Day event or at other environment fairs and festivals throughout the year. But for those who don't have time to organize a booth or can't rustle up volunteers to help, it's even easier to order some literature from PETA and just stand on a street corner and hand them out yourself. If you're too shy for that, you can always wear a T-shirt or a button with a message on it, and you'll be spreading awareness without even trying! We can all make Earth Day about more than just switching off your lights. We can make it about being truly green by eating green. Now imagine if each one of us was out there spreading awareness … we would change the world. (“PETA Spreads Awareness,” 2010)

PETA attempts to lead individuals to activism and offers various avenues through which an individual can become an environmental activist, some of which include buying products. Therefore, while they do create activists rather than consumers, EDN, EDF, and
PETA as part of the vernacular public memory are closer to official memory because they only require minimal individual action that brings about small-scale environmental change. And at times, as seen with EDN and PETA, these organizations echo consumer identity of the official memory.

In contrast to the aforementioned mainstream vernacular memories, NRDC and WWF, also part of the mainstream vernacular memory, move away from individual action (contesting both official memory and part of vernacular memory) and toward activism. The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) does not provide a wide range of behaviors individuals can choose to perform. Instead, the NRDC focuses on civic engagement through political action such as signing petitions and demanding Congress pass energy and climate legislation (“Celebrate Earth Day,” n.d.). The website asks the audience to commit to activist action such as “Tell President Obama to veto any attempts to weaken the Clean Air Act” or “Tell Congress to ensure adequate funding for global clean water” (“Action Center,” n.d.). NRDC also guides individuals to minimal actions through links such as: “Lose 10 Tons (of CO2) in 2010,” “Start Your Gardens,” and “Get Better Mileage out of Your Current Car” (“Celebrate Earth Day,” n.d.). These actions do not involve purchasing items, which highlights that individuals can act outside of a consumer framework. NRDC offers a set of actions that leads individuals away from consumerism and toward activism and conservation. NRDC creates a collective subject that confronts the political system and demands large-scale change, as well as offering them individualized, non-consumerism based modes of pro-environmental action.

Similar to NRDC, WWF emphasizes activist action that holds institutions accountable and seeks large-scale environmental change through legislation. Both
emphasize the importance of individuals becoming activists in the political arena. The WWF guides individuals to civic engagement, using their voices in the political sphere, which challenges the consumer culture created in the official memory (and part of mainstream vernacular memory) of Earth Day. In an excerpt from the website, WWF claims,

So for this milestone Earth Day, WWF and other organizations are urging people to contact their Senators and ask them to pass clean energy and climate legislation this year. Visit WWF’s climate campaign website for more information on contacting your Senators and taking additional action. For volunteer opportunities in your community, visit www.EarthDay.org. (“Earth Day 2010,” 2010)

Like NRDC, the WWF message promotes collective political action to demand large-scale environmental change through legislation. In this way, WWF works to challenge the official Earth Day narrative by offering activist action as an alternative to a consumer lifestyle. The NRDC and WWF began to diverge from the other mainstream vernacular messages of Earth Day because they emphasize political action that can result in significant environmental change.

Based on the analysis of NRDC and WWF, it appears that these mainstream vernacular memories substantially overlap with the radical vernacular memory of Earth Day. Like the NRDC and WWF, the more radical environmental groups Greenpeace and Earth First! offer a vision of environmental action that encourages Americans to become active participants in environmental advocacy and to civically engage in environmental policy. Greenpeace and Earth First! are explicit in their Earth Day messages contending
that large-scale change is imperative to solve the world’s environmental exigencies. The radical vernacular memory clearly contests individual, local, and consumer-oriented action.

Greenpeace has articulated an Earth Day story of collective action and large-scale change at the level of corporations and governments. Greenpeace develops this narrative by emphasizing national and international change that requires activists to move beyond their individual choices and civically engage in the political arena and in some cases risk their lives for environmental activism. Greenpeace argues that to make a collective difference, Americans need to become climate activists:

When the UN Climate summit convenes in Copenhagen this December, delegates there will be deciding the fate of the Earth. It's looking more and more likely they will bring us a lot of hot air, not a cooler planet. YOU need to tell them that's not good enough. YOU need to raise the bar on the world's expectations. It's time to get involved. It's time to get your friends involved. It's time to get your parents or your kids involved. ("This Earth Day," 2009)

Greenpeace believes that it is imperative for citizens to demand the changes that need to be made at the government level. They have faith in activism to achieve government legislation and regulation that keeps corporations and institutions environmentally ethical. Earlier in this same article, Greenpeace contends that through activism the organization has been able to bring about major change: “We've had three decades of experience in making the impossible happen -- an end to nuclear testing, protection of Antarctica from oil and gas exploration, a moratorium on commercial whaling, a ban on ocean dumping and a ban on trade in toxic waste, to name only a few” (“This Earth Day,”
2009). Through example, Greenpeace illustrates that the actions people should take are divorce from the minimal changes and consumerism outcomes of the official narrative. Instead, Greenpeace guides individuals to become activists and at times risk breaking the law to give the Earth a voice. For example, an image accompanying the article depicts a person in a Greenpeace jacket, hand-cuffed, with their arms behind their back. The caption reads: “Hundreds of Greenpeace activists from across Europe were arrested for action against climate change in Brussels earlier this year. By signing up as a climate activist, you can be a part of our efforts to demand action” (“This Earth Day,” 2009). Greenpeace provides individuals with an alternative choice, one that differs substantially from minimal actions like planting a tree or riding bike to work. Greenpeace gives individuals the opportunity to stand for something greater by demanding the changes necessary to save the planet.

In a recruitment video, Greenpeace employs transcendence in order to interpolate individuals into an environmental activist role. The video, “Inspiring Action,” provides the audience with a stunning portrayal of the action that Greenpeace activists take to make large-scale environmental change possible. Beyond individual action, Greenpeace does not stand idly by allowing governments and corporation’s free rein on the environment; they directly confront institutions that are contributing to environmental degradation. For example, in the video, Greenpeace activists are seen in jetties alongside large whaling vessels purposefully disrupting the whaler’s attempts at harpooning the whales (“Inspiring Action,” 2009). Greenpeace is calling individuals to move beyond small actions at the personal level to take on big risks that bring about huge rewards. Throughout the entirety of the video, Greenpeace attempts to lead the audience to see
why activism is necessary and to show them that they need to become activists. At the close of the video, Greenpeace calls individuals to action: “The fragile Earth deserves a voice. It needs solution. It needs change. It needs action” (“Inspiring Action,” 2009). These last words highlight that Greenpeace wants the audience to recognize that they can do so much more than eating locally grown foods. And, Greenpeace attempts to lead individuals to realize they must take action beyond their private lives and communities – they have to demand change from governments and corporations. Challenging the official narrative, Greenpeace contends that small-scale change driven by consumer-action will not produce the changes necessary to mend environmental degradation. In fact, Greenpeace says, “Earth Day 1970 proved to American politicians that the environment was a populist issue, that people cared about their planet, and that elected officials were going to be held accountable for what they did about protecting the Earth's future” (“Earth Day,” 2006). This example highlights Greenpeace’s belief that institutions are responsible for protecting the environment, not individual Americans.

Similar to Greenpeace, Earth First! demonstrates the need for individuals to realize that minimal actions on Earth Day do not provide the necessary large-scale change that has to occur in order to solve environmental exigencies. In an article by Earth First! blogger, Stephanie Rogers, she forwards a message from a prominent “green” blog Grist.org. According to Rogers, Grist.org started a campaign called “Screw Earth Day” (n.d.). Rogers argues that the message of the campaign is to emphasize the absurdity of other Earth Day messages that suggest individual action. Quoting directly from the Grist.org article, Rogers says, “’Too many people tokenize Earth Day, using it as an excuse to hug a tree one day and ram it with their SUV the next,’ said Chip Giller,
founder and CEO of Grist. ‘We say, screw that. One day is for amateurs. We can do better.’” (n.d.). Although Earth First! does not guide individuals to a particular action, it does attempt to challenge the official narrative by highlighting the weakness of an argument that tells individuals they can change the Earth through consumption.

Conclusions

The official public memory of Earth Day deployed a narrative that constituted individuals within a consumer identity. Individuals have a choice not in whether to consumer, but what to consume. In this frame, individuals have a choice between green or non-green products and services. In the end, the individual is constrained by a consumer identity, which upholds dominant ideological structures. On the other hand, vernacular public memory of Earth Day is multifaceted and complex. Instead of creating a consistent and cohesive Earth Day public memory, vernacular memory of Earth Day is made unclear by the variance among and between mainstream and radical memories. Part of the mainstream vernacular memory of Earth Day deploys a narrative that ends up closely reflecting the consumer ideals inherent in the official memory. However, another section of the mainstream vernacular memory conflicts with the other by defining individuals as activists rather than consumers. This section of the mainstream vernacular memory creates a narrative that is consistent and greatly overlaps with the radical vernacular memory. Both of these iterations of the vernacular public memory construct an activist identity where individuals demand large-scale change from government institutions.

The official public memory of Earth Day appears to dominate other Earth Day messages because all of the government stories about Earth Day align by guiding
individuals to consumer-type actions that maintain a balance between environmental responsibility and economic progress. On the other hand, the vernacular public memory of Earth Day is unclear. While attempting to offer an alternative view or a broader range of possibilities, part of the mainstream vernacular memory ends up prescribing action that is very similar to the official story: minimal action from individuals. However, another segment of mainstream vernacular memory, alongside the radical vernacular memory is able to effectively move away from the small-scale individual action to provide individuals the choice of becoming activists and demanding large-scale change from the government and other institutions. The differences and variance among and between mainstream and radical vernacular memories of Earth Day creates a divide and makes the Earth Day message of the vernacular culture ambiguous and uncertain. This confusion among vernacular Earth Day memories further solidifies the authority of the official memory as the clear and concise, and therefore, the dominant public memory of Earth Day.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Today, Earth Day still embodies the characteristics of the first celebration: a yearly gathering of Americans who demonstrate their environmental responsibility by contributing to activities that promote environmental awareness and change. For some Americans, Earth Day is about performing small, minimal actions at the level of the individual or community. For others, however, the goal of Earth Day is to spur environmental activism that produces large-scale environmental change. These differing visions of environmental activism reflect the split between public memories produced by official government sources and public memories produced by mainstream and radical environmental organizations. On the one hand, the official memory of Earth Day constructs a historical narrative that interpolates individuals into a consumerist identity. On the other hand, the vernacular memory, a multifaceted memory consisting of mainstream and radical iterations, attempts to subvert and challenge the official memory of Earth Day through a narrative that guides individuals to adopt an activist identity.

The story of Earth Day 1970, advanced by official and vernacular memories, illustrates how Earth Day was a response to visible environmental pollution, epitomized by the burning Cuyahoga River. Through institutional actors and actions, Earth Day 1970 brought about major environmental legislation including the Clean Air and Water Acts that put a stop to the visible pollution. The implication of this story is that since visible pollution is no longer evident, our environmental problems either are less pressing today or do not require institutional or official action. The official public memory draws from the legislative success and the lack of visible pollution in order to justify a shift in agency from the government to individuals in their communities. Vernacular memory, while it
advances a similar historical account of Earth Day, contests the official memory’s argument that environmental exigencies are less pressing. Furthermore, vernacular memory, specifically radical vernacular, challenges the official memory’s shift in agency to individuals arguing that legislative action is needed more now than ever before.

The official and vernacular memories employ these historical accounts of Earth Day to justify shaping possibilities of the present and future. Out of these historical narratives, official and vernacular memories construct subject positions that shape attitudes and actions so they serve particular interests. Official memory creates subjects that meet the American ideals of capitalism and individualism, which shifts agency to individuals. Individuals as agents are guided by the narrative to complete small-scale actions at the local level. In addition to reinforcing American ideals of capitalism and individualism, this subject position valorizes economic progress alongside individual environmental actions. Official memory promotes environmental responsibility without jeopardizing economic viability. Vernacular memory challenges official memory when it comes to the type of behaviors expected of individuals as subjects. Contesting the official memory, mainstream and radical vernacular memories create subjects as activists. Yet mainstream vernacular memory creates a consumer activist whose actions are still constrained to the level of the individual. Radical vernacular, on the other hand, creates activists who eschew consumerism.

The contestation over the public memory of Earth Day continues as official memory creates a consumerist identity and vernacular memory creates an activist identity. Official memory, by establishing Earth Day’s history and through the creation of a consumerist identity, is able to show its environmental social responsibility by
advocating for environmental awareness and change while simultaneously promoting and sustaining consumerism. In this frame, individuals appear to have a choice in the type of environmental behaviors they adopt. However, this choice is an illusion because the official memory constrains individuals through consumerism. Therefore, the choice is not *whether* to consume, it is *what* to consume. The official memory depicts environmental responsibility because its narrative leads individuals to green solutions when in reality, adopting a green lifestyle involves the purchasing of green goods and services. This is a problematic frame because it constrains large-scale environmental action and sustains a human-nature binary where nature serves the sole purpose of gratifying human desire.

Recognizing the failure of a consumerist identity, the vernacular memory advances its own subject identity. The analysis highlights the divergence within mainstream vernacular memory and also between mainstream and radical vernacular memories. One part of the mainstream vernacular memory of Earth Day actually reinforces a consumerist identity by promoting individual buying behaviors. However, the rest of the mainstream vernacular and the radical vernacular memories completely challenge official memory by creating an activist identity that produces individuals who advance large-scale environmental change at the level of legislation.

The official and vernacular, mainstream and radical, narratives about Earth Day provide a clear picture of how they have employed a public memory of Earth Day to meet their particular interests. These public memories of Earth Day have important ramifications for positive environmental action. The official memory’s Earth Day narrative closes off activist channels leading individuals to adopt a consumerist subject position within the narrative. By creating consumerists instead of activists, the official
memory constrains possibility for positive environmental change. The commodification of nature through the promotion of purchasing green products rather than non-green products damages human relationships with the environment. From a critical environmental view, promoting green consumerism as a type of environmental action perpetuates anthropocentric or human-centered views of the environment. Furthermore, a capitalist ideology is maintained, which marginalizes and silences other alternative environmental views that could help realize positive environmental change. Vernacular memory, primarily radical vernacular memory, recognizes the failings of the hegemonic consumerist subject position, and it offers the alternative position of individual as activist. Activists, according to vernacular memory, are necessary to bring about positive environmental change. Activism allows for a deeper understanding and relationship with the environment and gives the environment a voice in the political stage.

These two frames of Earth Day are significant for understanding the importance of present and future Earth Day remembrances. Depending on which version of the past is advanced in current Earth Day events, individuals come to view Earth Day differently. Because consumerism is a pervasive feature in our culture and helps individuals define who they are, most contemporary Earth Day remembrances are about learning how to buy the right products and taking small precautions at a personal level. However, there are other memories of Earth Day that provide an alternative understanding of the event. Individuals can come to understand that Earth Day is also about activism that extends beyond the yearly event to become a consciousness changing experience that pervades every day actions. Therefore, remembrances of Earth Day have and will continue to influence environmental action.
Understanding how public memory is strategically employed by differing and competing groups and the ramifications of those memories is important. Specifically, remembrances of Earth Day have described different types of environmental action. For official memory, environmental action is about purchasing “green,” and vernacular memory describes environmental action as activism that pursues legislative outcomes. As highlighted in this analysis, the Internet is an important site for public memory because it facilitates the contestation over public memory, specifically the public memory of Earth Day. The Internet has become a space where alternative voices find a place to speak. While institutions also have access to the Internet, it a diverse space that allows other, at times oppositional voices, to be heard and viewed just as much as the institutional voice.

**Limitations**

While this thesis compares the public memories of Earth Day in government and environmental organizations’ websites, there are limitations to the claims that one can draw from this analysis. While this study attempted to capture a range of government and environmental organizations, it was limited in scope. Government and environmental organizations that do not construct a public memory of Earth Day were left out of the analysis. These government and environmental organizations might contribute to the public memory of Earth Day through a different medium other than through their websites. In addition, the analysis highlighted only two of the many publics that contribute to the public memory of Earth Day. Some of the other contributors to the public memory of Earth Day not considered in this analysis could be corporations, international interests, media interests, and those organizations that do not use the internet as a primary source for public memory.
Another limitation to this analysis is that it focused solely on websites and web-based articles and blog posts. Not only are there other places within the Internet that could inform the public memory of Earth Day, the Internet is not the only medium through which Earth Day’s memory is carried on. Other spaces within the Internet that might contribute to a public memory of Earth Day could be social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, the public memory of Earth Day can be constituted through a variety of mediums that could be as much or more informative than the Internet.

**Contributions and Future Research**

This thesis contributes to public memory scholarship in three ways. First, the analysis focused on the intersection between public memory and environmental communication filling a gap in both public memory and environmental communication literature. Second, the analysis adds to the argument that public memory is carried on through the Internet, highlighting that the Internet is another cultural artifact worth scholarly attention. Finally, this project turned to Earth Day as a significant event in the larger environmental movement emphasizing that Earth Day is an important case study in public memory.

While this thesis has begun to explore environmental communication through the lens of public memory, further exploration is needed to reinforce public memory as another frame through which scholars can analyze environmental communication. Responding to the limitations of this study, further examination into the public memory of Earth Day would be beneficial, such as an analysis of present Earth Day events and activities or scholars could examine international/transnational remembrances of Earth
Day. Furthermore, although this study analyzed Earth Day as one part of the larger environmental movement, analysis of the public memory of other important environmental events within the movement is important. For example, examining the public memory of the food industry and how it is remembered in our culture could bring to light the complexity of how memories have been employed to make present arguments and cultural views about the food industry. Finally, public memory scholars should examine additional creations of public memory in virtual spaces. Further exploration into public memory reconstituted through the Internet would contribute to an understanding of the various mediums of public memory and of yet another way the Internet has changed the ways in which we come to know ourselves and the world in which we live.
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