

Beyond Lurking and Trolling:
Examination of College Student Literacy Practices in
Online Asynchronous Discussion Spaces

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ABSTRACT

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Over the course of the past 15 years, college student populations as well as information technologies have undergone dramatic changes. Today's college populations are more diverse as women, minorities, non-traditional students and veterans are the fastest growing populations. Additionally, the number of people enrolled in colleges has gone from 4.9 million in 2000 to 20.2 million in 2017. Simultaneously, the growth and proliferation of information technologies have changed the ways information is consumed and social relationships formed. The Internet, and discursive spaces that are specific to it, allow people to learn at their own pace, connect across national borders, and experiment with identities. This dissertation worked towards understanding how various college populations interact with online spaces, particularly asynchronous online spaces such as Reddit, Quora, Amazon product reviews, and various other spaces. The qualitative data collected for the dissertation included a survey of 84 participants and interviews with 12 participants. The data were analyzed using a theoretical framework based on Socio-Cultural Theories of Literacies, Critical Media Studies, and Postcolonial Theory. Findings

and implications of this dissertation show a need for increased involvement in critical media literacies education of college students, and a need for educators to build culturally responsive, civic-based, and globally minded curricula rooted in student information technology usage.

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List of terminology (in alphabetical order)

- Asynchronous/asynchronous communication: online communication that does not require immediate response as lag between the posting and reading of a message.
Asynchronous communication varies from chat-based systems which assume and rely on the presence of two or more persons during the communication exchanges.
- Bitmoji: more complex emojis that are often avatars and may be created by apps, or complex textual manipulation.
- Emoji: ideograms that represent an idea and have a Unicode character set the same way Cyrillic has a Unicode character set Emojis began as multimodal components of text messages and have permeated into online writing.
- Gifs: a short video that has been looped and plays on a loop.
- Image board: online space that is organized around having and commenting on images. Images can be peer-produced (ex: drawings, gifs, photographs) or come from other sources (ex: the internet, news sources, etc.).
- Lurking/lurker: an online reader who does not reveal their presence in an online forum.
- Meme: images that have been accepted by a given community as meaningful, and become augmented with each peer's own words. For instance, the "Confession Bear" meme includes a specific image of a bear with text above and text below. Each peer who wishes to participate in a certain type of posting, or literacy event, creates their own confession and posts it to the platform as a conversation starter.

- Message board: online spaces that is organized around writing posts and commenting on posts of others. Posts can contain hyperlinks and references to other content online and off.
- Moderators: many online discussions (ex: subreddits) are moderated. The role of moderators is to ensure that the norms and standards of the discussion follow community rules. Moderators can be volunteer members of the community, paid employees of the platform, or a combination of both. Many platforms feature several levels of moderation (ex: moderators, supermoderators).
- Noob: moniker given to inexperienced, or new users on many platforms.
- Online Asynchronous Discussion Spaces (AODS): online spaces where users/peers can post messages that then may be read and responded to by other peers/users. AODS may vary in terms and conditions of usage, levels of anonymity, rules of posting, membership requirements, content types, and other factors. As opposed to chat-based or social media spaces, AODS do not require or assume an audience or recipient either immediately or within a near time frame. AODS do not operate based on a pre-existing network of connections.
- Peer to peer networks: internet-linked computer systems.
- Troll/trolling: an online user who produces inflammatory remarks or seeks to subvert the flow of online discussion. Motivations and practices of trolls/trolling vary widely.
- User name/peer name: self-selected or assigned moniker peers use in online forums.
- Vlogging: video blogging.

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Dedication

To Morgan and Nero Mercury: the winds that propelled my sails, the stars that pointed the way, and the courage that started the journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For years I watched as my husband would become fascinated with an idea and then proceeded to explore it using asynchronous online discussion spaces (AODS). Although there was no set course of action, his explorations would include viewing YouTube content, discussing ideas with peers on Reddit and Quora, reading blogs and *Wikipedia*, and asking question after question on specialized discussion boards. I watched as he moved from being a relative novice to being close to expertise in a short amount of time. When his father gifted him an old motorcycle, he spent a week learning the electrical system in order to fix it. In the process, he found a discussion board that was dedicated to the maintenance and appreciation of his motorcycle model. By becoming involved in the forum, he made connections with several people across the world, and they began to exchange information about their bike rides, then about their interests, and about their families. Soon, they exchanged addresses and invitations to visit. We now have open invitations to visit his forum friends in Japan, Sweden, and across the United States.

When we began to house-search and mortgage shop, he asked Quora for help on how to handle buying a foreclosure, and with the support of a large group of foreclosure experts, he was able to navigate the difficult purchase process. I was too busy being pregnant, working, and researching, so I was of very little help. Once the house was ours, he taught himself how to work on plumbing, electrical, and engineering because he wanted to restore our 155 year old house by himself. As I began to prepare for my dissertation defense, I watched as he aggregated recipes for a brunch that he insisted on preparing for the large party of friends and family we invited to the event.

I watch him with amazement, and jealousy—he is able to learn anything he wants because of how well he can navigate the online world of discussions, reviews, blogs, and references. He

learned the process by himself and thrives when he is not bound by the perimeters of traditional school structures. But I also watch him with sadness—though he sees the value of the information he learns, he does not see himself as a reader or writer, and he does not see his knowledge as remarkable. In fact, he is always surprised by people’s reactions to all of the skills he has mastered online. But he is not willing to accept that his knowledge is as valuable as mine, though arguably I know far less about the world than he does.

So what gave him the idea that my knowledge is more valuable? The world did. The social, corporate, and educational structures are deeply invested in maintaining a status quo that privileges literacies gained through formal means. The messages about the value of information are clearly laid out in requirements listed for high paying positions, especially in the white collar realm. Today, finding a white-collar job without a college degree is increasingly difficult and nearly impossible without a high school diploma. Non-traditional learners like my husband are increasingly left behind or forced to struggle through degree programs that serve them poorly. My husband is not the only person I know who fits this description. Year after year, as I taught college students, I would meet people with similar learning paths and similar problems as he had. I saw how these students thrived in online spaces, and how much they loved learning online. And I saw how much the structure of classroom learning stifled, confused, and discouraged them. I wanted to know more about how they learn online and how this learning functioned in other areas of their lives.

What I also started to notice were the changes in the student populations themselves. Initially, I thought my experiences were just anecdotal—I saw more women, more veterans, and more non-traditional students in my classes. But then the trends I observed continued to manifest in all classes I taught, regardless of class level, focus, or modality. Suddenly, my classes were not

filled with 18 year olds fresh out of High Schools, but with people from all walks of life, all manners of preparation, and interests as diverse as the world itself. Mostly what I observed was the ways all students interacted with technology—how some struggled while others breezed through the technological landscape, how some were curious while others were cautious. Initially I thought the older students would be uninterested, or even scared of technology, and that younger students would love technology and be expert at it.

But what I mostly observed was the interaction of these variables and how they impacted what I did in the classroom: I was facing the Perfect Storm, and I felt little prepared to deal with the consequences if it. I noted that the scholarship I was studying delved into these aspects separately, but few studies engaged with all of the components of the Storm simultaneously. This study was a response to the questions I had about the intersections of technological growth and proliferation, shifting student demographics, and self-directed literacies acquisition through the use of online asynchronous sources.

Background to the Study

This dissertation examines the ways in which college undergraduates used AODS in the process of building literacies. Although the major focus of this work is on out-of-school literacies, the usage of AODS spaces impacts the school literacies building processes and is also discussed. This work intentionally draws attention to the connections between technological, economic, and educational realities that current college students face. I argue that educators have a duty to understand the range of literacies their students may operate with, and that exploring AODS contributes valuable information to the field of English Education through shedding light on how AODS assist students in their personal, professional, and educational literacies formation.

The Internet has become a widely available tool of communication in the last fifteen years. Coiro et al.(2014) point out that both the nature of technology and the way people use technology to disseminate information have undergone rapid transformation: “the Internet makes it possible to develop and immediately disseminate a new technology of literacy to every person who chooses to access it online” (p.5). One such “technology of literacy” is asynchronous online discussions (for the sake of brevity, I will refer to asynchronous online discussions as AODS throughout this dissertation) existing across a wide range of contexts. *The Linux Project* defines asynchronous communication as:

the exchange of messages, such as among the hosts on a network or devices in a computer, by reading and responding as schedules permit rather than according to some clock that is synchronized for both the sender and receiver or in *real time*. It is usually used to describe communications in which data can be transmitted intermittently rather than in a steady stream (2005).

AODS make it possible for people to leave comments without waiting for an immediate reply as they do not take place in a chat-based format and have lag built into the discursive mode of exchanges. Many AODS go on for days, weeks, months, and even years. Hence, the asynchronous mode of communication enables a growth of a conversation, or thread, over time. More specifically, AODS allow people to contribute to ongoing exchanges using multimodal tools such as text, image, video, or sound. To simplify the discussion, I chose to refer to people who use the Internet as “peers” to highlight the peer-to-peer networked reality of AODS. This is a significant variation from other types of online communication as it enables peers with intermittent online access the ability to participate in ongoing exchanges. Further, this mode of

communication has lag built in and thus encourages peers to create posts that are more slowly developed, can be researched, drafted, and re-drafted.

To a newcomer, the shape and mode of exchange in AODS may seem incoherent (Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2004). Both the linguistic and stylistic formats of these exchanges are not alike other types of conversational exchanges because peers develop task-based communication strategies (Davies, 2008; Ito 2013; Jenkins, 2004). Hence, the AODS are not the result of a random exchange for its own sake, but a specific way of communicating that has been developed by online peers over time (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008; Yancy, 2011).

Information technology developments continuously affect all spheres of life, including education, since they entail communication. Technology-enriched interactions change what may be possible in the classroom and beyond. Today, college students come prepared to handle complex technological operations and use information technology on a nearly constant basis (Pascoe, 2012). A recent report by the Pew Research Center revealed that “Aided by the convenience and constant access provided by mobile devices, especially smartphones, 92% of teens report going online daily — including 24% who say they go online ‘almost constantly,’” and 56% go online several times a day (Lenhart, 2015). Hence, by the time youth enter college, most are proficient in using the Internet to accomplish a variety of tasks. However, because of the changing nature of college-student population, the presence of non-traditional students and veterans must be acknowledged. The two populations may not have had the same types of experiences as traditional students due in part to their age and in part to the nature of working in the military.

Many scholars have already noted how deeply this reality impacts educational institutions (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008; Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007). Additionally,

The New London Group (1996) emphasizes the need to study various literacies emerging in online environments in order to create responsive pedagogies aiming to serve students. Not only can educators prepare themselves to understand the literacies of the new Internet spaces, they can also study the Internet's potentialities to create spaces for resistance of the hegemonic and oppressive messages produced by capitalist societies (Gajjala, 2002; Nakamura, 2007; Franklin, 2005). Many oppressed individuals have been using AODS to connect to others (Nakamura, 2007; Franklin, 2005). In these spaces, subjectivised small narratives that contest gender, race, class, nationality, power, and oppression are produced. AODS spaces have a tremendous potential to be used in educational setting not only as spaces for examination, but also as models for resistance (Alvermann & Hagood, 200a, 200b; Morrell, 2008).

Despite the democratic potential of AODS, the very notion of democracy and social justice in these spaces is problematic at best. Access becomes a crucial aspect of democratic unbalance as some populations may not have the same types of time or ability to enter into online discussions. As noted by Henry Jenkins, danah boyd, and Mimi Ito (2016), the myth of empowerment through access of online spaces is just that—simply having the ability to access the Internet does not guarantee liberation. As seen in the 2016 presidential election, corporate and political interests have the power to tip AODS and pervert them for their own gain. In essence, though AODS have the potential to empower voices, they have as much potential to quash and mislead efforts to liberate.

Rationale

In the past 15 years, the number of students enrolling in colleges in the United States increased. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of college students in the U.S. is estimated at 20.2 million—up from merely 4.9 million in 2000 (National Center for Educational

Statistics, 2015). Between 2011 and 2018, college students represented a vastly diverse population, especially college students who chose to attend school in cities. The idea of “college student” itself underwent drastic revision in the past decade: female enrollment outnumbered male enrollment at 11.5 million and 8.7 million respectively (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). Further, the U.S. Department of Education estimated a rapid and exponential influx of non-traditional students, defined as students who are over the age of 24, into colleges (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015, 1996). Additionally, the G.I. Bill enabled many veterans to attend college—raising the veteran enrollment up by 42% from 2000 to 2009 resulting in roughly one million veterans and their families receiving educational benefits in 2014 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Adding adult learners into college classrooms presented a shift in what educators should understand to be a “college student” from many perspectives: social, experiential, and educational. While might have been possible to understand what “college students” knew about literacy from examining high school curricula or even college English class curricula 10 years ago, the understanding of what “college students” know about literacy, and more importantly, where they gain this knowledge is much more of a challenge today. Hence, it is imperative to study the literacy practices of the *new* college students to understand the preparation that the many types of college students may have, and the resources they may be consulting in their educational careers.

In order to enable any understanding, conducting studies of discrete learning and literacy environments college students engage with are necessary. One such environment is asynchronous online spaces. These spaces are quite distinct from social media or chat-based spaces because they have time-lag built into them. This time lag enables the communicator to construct responses that are not time-sensitive in the sense that a responder is waiting to see

them. The writers of these messages are addressing a pluralistic audience that is not awaiting a prompt reply and that may not even take up their writing. Possibilities of revisions, research, and insertion of links, images, and references to other posts create an environment that is worthy of a closer examination, especially since these spaces receive very little attention from researchers of literacy.

As the progress of technology is rapidly moving onward, it is imperative to conduct frequent studies of the ways in which people use technology to communicate and to learn. It is also critical that the intersection of education and technology be explicated as it exists outside of the classroom and as it is currently enabled by AODS. Previous studies of literacies in asynchronous spaces are already outdated as they focused on spaces that are no longer relevant or whose protocols are no longer practiced. Even Ito's study of adolescent engagement with online spaces examines literacy practices that have been outmoded by today's standards. Hence, a study that took into account the past practices but also aims to understand today's practices is necessary and ought to be another study to eventually become outmoded, and then used as a justification for conducting a newer study of the innovative protocols that are yet to be created.

Problem Statement

Despite the growth of scholarship about the Internet across many disciplines, AODS and the literacies produced there remain largely ignored by both researchers and educators. Despite a few studies about youth engagement in online spaces (Ito et al., 2013; Morrell, 2008), and a few studies of literacies produced in online spaces (Davies, 2008; Marshall, 2007), there have been no studies dedicated to the examination of literacies that the various populations of college students engage in, develop, and practice in asynchronous online spaces. In order to better understand the current literacies of diverse college populations, and in order to create responsive,

and culturally relevant curricula, educators must study what college students know about online spaces, how digital literacies are acquired, what these literacies help college students accomplish, and how out of school and in school online literacies intersect.

Research Questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do college students utilize asynchronous online discussion spaces?
2. In what ways, if at all, are the social, educational, and professional literacies developed through participation in AODS?
3. What types of interactions, if any, do AODS enable and hinder for college students?
4. How, if at all, do various college populations value AODS usage?

Pilot Study Results

A pilot study conducted in 2014 (Markiewicz, 2014) served as material for initial theorizing of what AODS spaces were understood as. By observing AODS I found that that there were tenuous communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) that developed modes of communicating (Kahn & Kellner, 2005), and adapted the communication practices (Alvermann, 2008) over-time through a wide variety of tools thus producing unique discourses in each space observed. The peers who participated in AODS did not constitute a stable or consistent group (Marshall, 2007), hence the tenuous community that formed was difficult to pin-point in a concrete way (Markiewicz, 2014). However, the peers who participated in AODS had the capacity to alter the online discussion practices because of the rapidly changing online trends (particularly in regards to image popularity and phraseology), and the technological innovations that made using new media formats in discussions possible (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2008; Markiewicz, 2014).

For instance, the development of faster and more robust Internet connections made possible the downloading and uploading of large files (like music or videos) available to peers, and thus, made it possible for peers to add these multi-media tools to their discussions (Markiewicz, 2014). Further, AODS emerged as spaces devoted to multimodal play (Vasudevan, 2006) —or a way to experiment with multi-modal tools in the process of communicating through which peers practiced various ways of communicating meaning (Markiewicz, 2014). Multimodal play in AODS enabled peers to gain literacy skills deemed valuable in formal academic education as well as a broad range of out-of-school literacies (Markiewicz, 2014). In essence, AODS became sites of situated cognition (Gee, 2007) where peers not only have the opportunity to build/gain/strengthen their skills, but were also participating in the social process of exchanging ideas and practicing new forms of expression appropriate to the formats used by the literacy communities formed in AODS.

I found that AODS had the potential to serve as educational tools for many people who were excluded from formal schooling (either because of dropping out, lack of funds, or difficult life circumstances) (Gee, 2007) as well as augmented the literacy development of any peer. I demonstrated that AODS both assisted in knowledge building and afforded peers agency over their identity formation (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008) and pleasure (Gee, 2007) in the literacy-building process (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008).

But what did peers actually DO? As Vasudevan (2006) noted, much of the text on AODS is “multi-modal play” that allowed peers to test new technologies’ capacity in online discussion. I showed that multi-modal play lead peers to test the boundaries of texts they produced which lead to AODS peers experimenting with not only the digital tools, but also the language they used to communicate meaning. Further, many of the comments found in AODS could be characterized

as forms of reification that Barton and Hamilton define as “Texts [that] move across contexts, often changing their meanings and functions but nevertheless providing a fixed reference point in different events. Or, rather, to make this statement more active, people moved texts across contexts. We refer to this as recontextualisation” (2005, 23). I posit that peers often recontextualize a text (be it an image, a sound bite, a clip, or even written text). There are various ways peers did this: captioning or re-captioning a picture, splicing songs, mashing up clips, or using multi-media contents to respond to texts or other multi-media.

Participation in asynchronous online discussion spaces was a form of cultural production hinging on each peer’s cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). In fact, I believed that recontextualisation (Barton and Hamilton, 2005), in asynchronous online discussion spaces, was only possible because of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) each peer possessed. Bourdieu’s (1991) work described cultural capital as cultural power that people could use to gain recognition, power, or fame. Finally, my study revealed that, in the context of recontextualisation in AODS, cultural capital allowed peers to produce clever texts that gain notoriety, appreciation, or a following thus elevating the peer’s status in that online asynchronous discussion space community of practice (Wenger, 1999).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Analysis found in this dissertation was based on Socio-Cultural Theories of Literacies, Critical Media Studies, and Postcolonial Theory. This study assumed that literacies are plural multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996) and social acts that were developed by people living in society for a variety of purposes that must be understood in the historical context they were produced in (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 2003). For AODS, the socio-historical context is the growth and proliferation of information technologies enabling the creation of the information networks present on the Internet. As Alvermann (2008), Gee (2007) and Marshall (2007) noted, in asynchronous online discussion spaces, member participation and continuous technological advancement influence the forms the exchanges take.

AODS were framed as literacy practices (Street, 2003) that encompassed a myriad of literacy events (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003) that peers participated in and changed over time. As Street (2003) noted, literacy practices were not measurable in themselves, but were patterns of usage that a group engaged in and that was mediated with a text of some sort. In order to understand and measure what happened in communities that used literacy to communicate, learn, or work, literacy events were theorized (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003). Literacy events were observable and measurable—they were specific actions that involved a text and were repeated by others. AODS were created by communities that relied on textual exchanges to grow conversations—I thus proposed that each post is an event, and part of larger literacy practice.

Additionally, the work of Lankshear & Knoble (2008) and (Kress, 2003), helped to extend the work of Street (2003) into the digital realm by transforming the idea of “literacies” to encompass digital production, consumption, and interaction with digitally mediated “texts.” In addition, Kahn & Kellner’s (2005), and Marshall’s (2007) work on digital environments helped me frame AODS as non-linear spaces where many discussions happened simultaneously, often impinging on one another, forcing peers to negotiate ways of reasoning and organization. The often-chaotic form these discussions took impacted the way peers formulated their posts and often lead to conflict (Markiewicz, 2014). To this end, the work of Gunther Kress became paramount (2003) as Kress noted that literacies were an evolving issue and that “multiliteracies” were a necessary way to understand the types of skills developed by online peers. Additionally, cultural production and reproduction happening in asynchronous online discussions were underpinned with each peer’s cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991)—unique knowledge of the world and the individual’s place inside of that world. Framing “literacies” in this way allowed me to discuss literacies as rooted in lived experiences. I introduced the concept of “recontextualisation” (Barton & Hamilton, 2005) to demonstrate that AODS peers undertake recontextualisation in order to deploy their cultural capital.

The study of media and the role media play in the process of learning were necessarily relevant to this study. I sought to understand how the changing technology impacted learners and their potential to gather information, disseminate knowledge, and engage others using digital tools. Gramsci (1988) and Benjamin (2008) understood that digital tools were a powerful means of learning about the modern world and championed the usage of photographs and films in the process of social learning. Although using media in education has incurred much strife in the past 50 years, notably from scholars such as the Adorno and Horkheimer (2012), there had been

a steady number of proponents of using media in education or at least inviting media into the schooling process (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000a, 2000b). I used the Critical Media Studies scholarship to demonstrate that the media, and the Internet in particular, were a necessary component of education young people. I explored the connection between the types of literacies that may be produced in online asynchronous spaces and the types of skills college students believed to be acquiring in the school setting.

Finally, I examined the asynchronous online spaces through the Postcolonial Theory lenses. Since its deployment, the Internet was a highly contentious space where intellectual and commercial interests often clashed with the realities of access and difference (Franklin, 2005). In order to understand the means of cultural production made possible by the Internet, I engaged and complicated the theory of hybridity. I observed how participants experienced cultural clashes, intermingling, and something in between. I used Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) borderlands to test how the Internet promoted the blurring of separations between cultures, modes of expression, and personal values, but also the rising digital colonialism. Ultimately, I showed that the Internet was a place where the subaltern could speak—and I believed they can. I engaged thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Lisa Nakamura, Maryanne Franklin, and others to explain the potentialities of the Internet as a means for being an agent of social change and a space where no true center exists. This was, however, a theory that needed to be tested and contested as I worked in self-conscious ways that brought me again and again to the postcolonial notions of seeking freedom and speaking out against repression. Without the postcolonial aspect, my work would have fallen victim to the ongoing “black and white” debate about media (with the few gray specks here and there). I wanted to make my understanding of AODS as rich and complex as the

people who contributed to these forums. Hence, the postcolonial theory aspect of my work reminded me to question what I saw.

The theoretical framework was created to demonstrate the fractured reality of studying media engagement of young people in an integrated and meaningful way. As I said throughout the dissertation, *The Perfect Storm* caught educators and policy makers by surprise. A major aspect of why the “adults” were not prepared for the arrival and intermeshing of the issues associated with rapidly shifting realities of college was a lack of foresight, disciplinarianism, and over-focusing on one issue. In a sense, educators, policy makers, and parents sought to find scape goats and easy answers to questions like “why are young people so fascinated with online spaces?” Protectionism, fear of the media, globalization-driven thinking, and an erasure of student subjectivities resulted in the current fractured research tradition that does not produce truly culturally responsive curricula for the incoming college students. By combining the seemingly unrelated theories of Critical Media Studies, Socio-Cultural Theories of Literacies, and Postcolonial Theories, this dissertation worked to address some of the gaps in the current scholarship.

Critical Media Studies

The study of media is a multi-disciplinary endeavor that seeks to understand the place of media in contemporary culture. The field is historically polarized between staunch technophobes and over-enthusiastic technophiles. One side paints the media as a sinister brain eater intent on creating consumer-zombies that march to Big Brother’s beat. The other side sees the media as humanity’s ultimate hope for peace, love, and mutual understanding. More recently, a third position is gaining ground: neither enthusiastic nor pessimistic. The critical position sees media as a reality that is neither good nor bad, but something to be engaged and dialogued with.

Scholars in this group tend to see youth as partners in building knowledge about media content, media production, and media tools. Most importantly, along with the students, these scholars seek to find ways to use the media as a way to resist hegemonic messages of oppression.

Marxism

Much of the media studies, critical media theory, media literacy, and media education were underpinned by Marxist ideas. In Marxist thought, the concept of mediation referred to the process through which two groups struggle to find a reconciliation in any given society. But, as Marx and Engels (1973) noted, there was no real mediation between the ruling classes and the base, or productive, classes. Instead, the working class was mediated by ideology—the false set of beliefs propagated and formulated by the ruling class in order to control the laborers. In *The German Ideology* (1973), Marx and Engels wrote:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. 1973, p. 64

For many media critics, the concept of ideology, partially outlined above, became a lynchpin for analysis. In terms of Marx and Engels, the possibility of control through ideas and of blind obedience to these ideas was codified in the overall theory of worker oppression. Clearly, cultural production became a key arena where ideology was expressed, spread, and enforced.

Ideology was further taken up and developed by Antonio Gramsci (1988), an Italian Marxist writing from the middle of World War I until four years prior to the outbreak of World

War II. Gramsci understood that ideology was a weak concept in and of itself. Gramsci saw the power of ideas and the way they operate in society, and recognized the power media had to play in that process—the unseen and perpetuated cycle of obedience to ideas was more than just the ruling class’ oppression. Gramsci thus described the process of hegemony where ideas were introduced into society and took such deep root that those who were oppressed not only failed to see the ideas, but actively engaged in pushing these ideas onto others through subtle social manipulations. In effect, hegemonic ideas appeared to be natural and uncontestable instead of socially constructed and perpetuated. Gramsci believed that one of the means of combatting hegemony was education and individual media consumption.

In fact, for Gramsci, education and hegemony were inextricably linked: “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces ... but in the international and world-wide field” (1988, p. 348). This relationship, as Gramsci saw it, was deeply rooted in the interaction of an individual with culture, especially with print media which Gramsci saw as promoting reflection and leading towards gaining of critical consciousness (1988, p. 337-343). In this process, the individual is to face one self as a natural and historically situated being. In fact, it is this process that inevitably leads towards criticism which then fuels revolutionary ideas and action.

Frankfurt School. While Gramsci (1988) showed great enthusiasm for the potential of learning that could be accomplished through media, other critics were not as enthusiastic. The Frankfurt School was predominantly comprised of media critics who understood the power of media, but believed that this power was destructive. That may in fact be a generous description of the attitude that Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno (1944) held for media. In 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer published “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Colored by

their experiences with propaganda in pre-World War II Germany, the essay attacked anyone who might dare enjoy popular culture. “Culture Industry” was a term Adorno and Horkheimer used to describe the system of media that was “unified”: radio, film, and magazines. In their analysis, Adorno and Horkheimer showed that radio and film no longer needed to show themselves off to be art because they were obviously businesses existing to extract money from workers. They then tied the media to the heavy industries, like coal or steel, and showed that these industries were behind the system of domination.

But not all members of the Frankfurt School were as hateful towards the media as Adorno and Horkheimer. Walter Benjamin (2008) wrote extensively on the media and on the effects of mechanical reproduction on the consumers of art. In this writing, Benjamin presented a starkly different view of mass media—it was shown as a liberating force that was vested with the ability to move art and knowledge outside of the sphere of privilege and myth and into the proximity of consumers. Benjamin developed the idea of “aura” (2008, p. 26-27) or a form of mysticism that one-off pieces of art possesses. Aura, Benjamin explained, prevented people from becoming engaged with the work because of the symbolic status the piece acquired.

Benjamin placed great hopes in the technology of reproduction and saw film as a form of revenge—where the actor was a stand-in for the workers. Workers lost their humanity as they performed a repetitive task in front of machinery, but actors performed in front of machinery that enabled them to gain humanity and give it back to the worker (2008, p. 28-31). Further, Benjamin suggested that photographs and neons were the most pure means of transmitting information and were the most revolutionary ways to educate the public. Benjamin’s analysis revealed the synergistic and oppositional nature of media that could serve as means of liberation

of the masses. Benjamin and Gramsci both recognized that the media could play a powerful role in education and liberation of oppressed groups.

How to Study Media

Between the 1930s and 1960, a great new thing swept the living rooms across the globe: television. This invention caused an explosion of criticism on both sides of the media debate, and predictably, produced as many voices pro as against. Roland Barthes used Saussure's semiological techniques to understand how the media spread messages, and how those messages could be understood. Many of the concepts Barthes discussed in *Mythologies* (1972) were ways to de-code the ideological points that the media machine was attempting to put forth to the public. Barthes' discussion of spectacle and myth were particularly crucial because they began the conversation of how the media were mechanisms of replacing traditional myths (like religion or family) with new myths (like imperialism). By perverting the familiar images and connotations derived from tradition, media architects were able to produce instantly recognizable messages that attempt to convince the audiences of the might and right of the message itself. Hence a myth was a type of speech, or a metalanguage, which attached themselves to the already existing Sign (signifier + signified) with the expressed and premeditated purpose of skewing reality: "Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the act of refusing oneself to it. So the more a language object resists at first, the greater its final prostitution" (1972, p. 244). Barthes' analysis clearly demonstrated how even the smallest bits of advertising, or shows, or magazines could be deeply infested with myths that in fact did not represent "reality" but rather represented an un-reality that people were being coerced into accepting. Barthes' analysis posited that the critic of this system must somehow stand outside of it and must become a "mythologist." In effect, criticism was a lonely task of cutting ties with those who

enjoyed the myths, and a means of denying pleasure to oneself by not enjoying the myths. In a way, this resembled the critic's role as described by Adorno—a rather lonely place where the critic alone stood up to the content before him and showed how dangerous it was for the rest of humanity. But unlike Adorno, Barthes was not fatalistic in his assessment of the media—to the contrary, he was invested in building critical consciousness and helping people decipher the myths they were being presented with. He did not see the “public” as always dupable, though he admitted that once people combined into a public, they were more apt to lose their ability to think critically. Here Barthes echoed Gramsci's ideas and opposed Benjamin's. Barthes' ideas, in fact, opened up a space for a pedagogy of media.

Stuart Hall (2012) picked up Barthes' work in his “Encoding/Decoding” model of communication accomplished through the media. Hall's theory, a derivative of Semiology, was produced within the context of the Birmingham Center for the Media and flowed out of a tradition of deep enthusiasm for the media. Hall showed the complexity of what happened when media messages were produced, and theorized a language that could be usefully applied to discuss media. To begin, Hall described the issues of understanding media, and showed that media were vested with a language, or signs, which were recognizable to those receiving the messages. Unlike written or spoken language, however, media signs often were imprecise because there was no guarantee that the receivers interpreted the sign in the way that the producer intended.

Hall also discussed the political aspect of his theory in a conscientious way. Hall showed that the producers of media messages tended to be preoccupied with the economic gains, and thus they sought to spread hegemonic ideas/codes/messages to viewers in hopes of reaching an uncritical and “ideal” recipient who took the messages at face value. However, as Hall demonstrates, there

were other audiences (and individuals did react to messages differently as well) that may be far more politically aware and who reacted to the messages unfavorably. Hall expressed that media education using the sociological system he presented could lead to empowering audiences to perform as political recipients of media messages. Hall's work, in conjunction with Gramsci, Barthes, and Benjamin continued to stress the importance of media education. Like Barthes, Hall showed how powerful the media were. Despite showing the power of media, Hall resisted typing the media as the enemy and following the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer. Instead, Hall focused on finding ways to include media in education.

Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1994) revolutionized the way scholars conceptualized media, because of its radical proposition that each medium has its own message. McLuhan followed *Understanding Media* with *The Medium is the Message* in 1967—a stunning multi-media work that aimed to catalogue the effect of media on society. McLuhan proposed that media be studied not merely as conduits for other media (as in, television for its own sake and not only for the sake of the programming it features). McLuhan demonstrated that the media, each in its own way, contained their own messages and as a system, contributed to the growth of the “global village.” McLuhan wrote: “we can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay” (2001, p. 63). Technology brought people together and re-tribalized the world making information flow inevitable and pluralistic.

McLuhan claimed that the media themselves were neutral and served as additions, or extensions of human ability and sense. Media could only amplify what humans already were, they could not change, better, or worsen anything in the world. Additionally, media became natural resources because society accepted them as a social bond. Simultaneously, McLuhan demonstrated the

displacement of youth from the world. Youth, McLuhan posited, were being infantilized by an education system that dated back to the 19th century, and caused youth to rebel (2001, p.100). McLuhan did not take up the possibility that media in and of themselves were disinterested yet political, and rather than see them as tools humans use, McLuhan implanted the media into the human living organism (1994, p.41-48). This information flow caused the east to go west and west to go east, or to de-center the world. Here McLuhan rejected the possibility of continuous global struggle and marginalization. Although he was attempting to demonstrate the generative power of the media, the effect of his work was rather a denial of many crucial political struggles that were yet unresolved (1994, p. 33-40) in 2018. In his later work, McLuhan said that media enabled minorities to connect, which was a partial reversal of his earlier radical position (1994, p. 33-40). McLuhan's work thrust the media consumers into the medium itself. The work of Barthes and Hall was strengthened here but rejected the lonely mythologist proposition from Barthes and did not splinter the audience the way Hall did. In effect, McLuhan introduced the concept of active media consumption and placed the responsibility for media into communal hands.

Media motivated anxiety

One of McLuhan's staunchest critics was Guy Debord. In both of his books, *Society of the Spectacle* (2014; first published in 1967) and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1998), Debord unequivocally and directly called out McLuhan and other media enthusiasts as naïve apologists for a mass system of corruption. Debord described "spectacle" as an instrument of unification of either a part or all of society, an instrument to produce false consciousness, a disseminator of a false gaze: "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (2014, #4). Much like Adorno and Horkheimer, Debord was

highly disturbed by the media and saw it as nothing other than an instrument of propaganda and social control.

Debord saw the effects of media consumption as alienating people from one another. In effect, the spectacle was something that took the voice away from people, and reflected what Debord saw as a “modern tendency towards passivity” (2014, #13). In his analysis, and much like in the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer, people were nothing but helpless herds who had no desire or ability to approach the spectacle critically. Debord denied any emancipatory possibility that the media, or the spectacle, had, and denied the possibility of the existence of a fractured society. What Debord ignored was the creation of work in the intellectual fields that Benjamin, and others, predicted as rising as a response to the automation. Rather, Debord insisted on the concept of “false consciousness” as his blanket explanation of the effects of spectacle on people. Much in line with Debord, Neil Postman penned what can only be seen as privileged-male-anxiety-over-loss-of-social-control- and-how-the-media-was-to-blame: *Technopoly* (1992). Postman argued that technological changes produced excitement which rendered people helpless in face of new gadgets. The enthusiasm produced lead people to the loss of critical ability and unconditional surrender to the new advances. Audaciously, Postman attributed this mind-set to the “genius” of American capitalists, the “newness” of American society, and the “frontier” attitude of the country (1992, p. 40-55). The attribution of such values to one society demonstrated the polarized and hierarchical view of the world Postman possessed and set up the rest of his work as polemic speculation rather than researched and informed conversations.

According to Postman, anyone could present themselves as an expert because we live in a world we do not understand, and there was always a professor stupid enough to buy into an idea. Postman expressed a truly disturbing point of view as he openly declared that there were people

who should be vested with power to dictate what information the masses should consume, in what order, and when. Postman failed to note that he was actually advocating for a totalitarian mode of information control while describing people as unable to decide for themselves. In fact, this view reflected Debord's ideas as well as the views of Adorno and Horkheimer. All authors share the same anxieties. And all were white men.

Audiences and Design

The point of technology, audiences, and design was taken up by Leah Lievrouw (2006) who reviewed several theories of technology in "New Media Design and Development: Diffusion of Innovations v Social Shaping of Technology." Lievrouw posited that the development of media was essentially a social process and resisted the technological determinism present in writings of McLuhan and Debord. Lievrouw demonstrated that it was people who made technology through an intricate process: "technological determinism is an inadequate description or explanation of technological innovation and development, or of social change more generally" (2006, p. 248). Evidently, technology operated along the same axis as social change, and could be seen as separate from social processes. Thus, Lievrouw described the contingency stance as seeing technology as iterative, dynamic, and extremely social.

Lievrouw's earlier article, "New Media and the 'Pluralization of Life-Worlds'" (2001) argued that new media were contributing to the media world by providing non-corporate alternatives. Through new media, individuals had the ability to share various subjective stances and resist hegemonic norms. Access emerged as a key issue: Lievrouw formulated the concept of "capacity" to clarify what an individual needed in order to participate in new media. She then juxtaposed capacity with access she termed as a technological and connective issue as opposed to cognitive or educational one. As Lievrouw noted, "the 'networked society' may turn out to be

more differentiated than societies supported by traditional media and social institutions, perhaps because heterotopic communication or other new strategies for interaction and information seeking have emerged” (2001, p. 23)—a stance counter to McLuhan’s notion of a global village, and certainly a stance that differentiated globalization from unification. Lievrouw’s work demonstrated that new media enabled and promoted the connectivity between subjectivities in an uneven, postmodern social landscape.

Postmodern Subjectivities

Much of the discussion about the Internet, and media in general, rested on the assumption that the subject was a singular, determined, and unified entity. However, scholars who worked in the Postmodern theoretical traditions saw things very differently—to thinkers like Mark Poster (2013), subjects were constantly in flux and the new media, particularly the Internet, had the potential to tap into the ever moving process of subject development: “the mode of information enacts a radical reconfiguration of language, one which constitutes subjects outside the pattern of rational, autonomous individual.” (2013, p. 57). Poster noted that the Internet did something else as well: not only were subjects constantly in flux and undetermined, the Internet had the potential to challenge the grand-narratives of social domination. By being a tool that was disseminated to masses and controlled by masses, the Internet had the ability to spread small narratives that saw to express subject positions in a given context. What was most striking about Poster’s analysis was his recognition that the Internet pushes back against the very notion of nation states: if the nations hoped to put into place laws to govern the Internet, they had to collaborate on creating and implementing these laws. In this process, the sovereignty of the nations was challenged and weakened.

Poster's discussion countered the anxious white-male audience. Poster called out the reality that this group was indeed feeling anxious, and most of that anxiety was derived from the fear of losing a place as an intellectual. This was a perfect way to describe the ideas expressed by both Debord and Postman who were both white males with extreme anxiety about their place in the intellectual world. Why else would Postman invent lies and humiliate his colleagues with false stories? Clearly, he believed he knew a better way to know, and Poster named that space as anxious.

Pedagogies

The subject of media education seemed to be located on a spectrum of reactions ranging from extreme technophobia all the way to the bubbly technophilia. Many scholars, like Postman or Adorno and Horkheimer, constructed educations that taught children about the evils of media. This argument, often called "protectionist" hinged on the belief that children were naïve and innocent beings who needed to be prepared to defend themselves against the propaganda inherent to all media.

Renee Hobbs and Amy Jensen wrote "The Past, Present, and Future of Media Literacy Education" (2009). In this piece Hobbs and Jensen stressed the necessity of involving media in school curricula. By demonstrating the cultural drive towards participatory culture, Hobbs and Jensen showed that media literacy needed to be combined with critical literacy and information literacy. This process could only be accomplished by involving professionals from other fields as well as parents, children, and community organizations. The point of involving so many stakeholders was to avoid the "tool competence" approach to media education and keep alive more important points of discussion: who owns the media, what do media do, and how are groups represented? Since answers to these questions were not uniform, Hobbs and Jensen demonstrated

that a common ground for media educators must be reached, and both sides, the protectionists and the enthusiasts, need to come together to establish a set of competencies and outcomes that media educators should strive for. Most importantly, however, we needed to work to make school not the technology-poor environment that stands in opposition to the technology-rich home. As McLuhan demonstrated, children spend 6 hours per day at school, and this environment tends to be devoid of the technology that can be useful in the process of education. Many educators saw the media as the enemy—knowledge would save all from falling under the enemy’s spell. This approach is, as David Buckingham (2003) pointed out, both ineffective and naïve. As Buckingham discussed, the media were a complex and lasting part of our society, and they were even more important in children’s’ lives because of how quickly their presence grows. For Buckingham, “media education (...) aims to develop both critical understanding and active participation” through teaching “broad based competence” in understanding various types of media (2003, p. 4). Buckingham’s approach stressed the need to base the media curriculum not as a monolithic set of texts, a cannon so to speak, but rather on the understanding of the dynamic nature of the media that will necessarily shift the balance of expertise in the classroom. Children needed to be included as partners in this type of educational process because they would have media competence already by the time they entered the world of education.

Buckingham presented the key to understanding approaches to media education: understanding of media was a social process: “it is a social phenomenon in which social interests and identities are unavoidably at stake” (2003, p. 48). However, consumption of media was not the ultimate goal of media education—children must learn how to protect themselves in the media rich environment and to produce media content that was meaningful to their lives. Buckingham

claimed that English ought to be the domain that took up media education to ensure all students had access to the discipline.

Others also the social aspect of technology, and especially the Internet. Donna Alvermann and Margaret Hagood (2000a) discussed the benefits of bringing fandoms into critical literacy education. Fandoms, as defined by Storey and quoted by Alvermann and Hagood, were groups of teens who were interested in the same cultural phenomenon and saw to share their love for it through consumption, criticism, and production. Alvermann and Hagood reviewed relevant literature to demonstrate that fandoms could provide a meaningful way to encourage youth to look at their culture critically while being interested in learning literacy skills.

Popular culture could additionally provide a useful frame for youth to understand the world on their own terms. Alvermann and Hagood further explored these issues in their second article, “Critical Media Literacy: Research, Theory and Practice in New Times” (2000b) where they pushed back on the idea of monolithic media and presented the discussion of subject positionalities. Here, much like Poster, Alvermann and Hagood used the poststructuralist framing to present the self as fractures and unstable. Additionally, meaningful education using popular culture needed to be structured to avoid the “anything goes” attitude while it helped students navigate the popular culture world with a critical eye towards their own role and position. Alvermann and Hagood pointed to the adolescent enthusiasm for technology and demonstrated that as educators, we could take an advantage of this willingness and engage it in the process of critical media education “to break down the age old distinction between high and low culture” (2000b, p. 19).

Two of the key voices in media literacy and media education movements were Douglass Kellner and Jeff Share. Over the space of two articles, Kellner and Share outlined the issues in and

approaches to media literacy education in the United States in the 21st Century. On the one hand, Kellner and Share noted that media literacy education was simply not available to many students in the United States because the school they were in exclude media literacy study from the curriculum (2007). On the other hand, they pointed out to the urgency of teaching critical media literacy in order to enrich and empower students in the democratic process. What was most striking in their approach was continual insistence on valuating student voices in the process of learning (2005). Both articles worked to empower and inform educators who recognized the urgency to include critical media literacy in the classroom. A key component in Kellner and Share's work was the recognition of the changing landscape of media in the 21st Century. Like others before them, they pointed out the inefficiency of teaching print-based literacies only and demonstrated the power of media to present debates about gender, race, class, and representation into the classroom.

Resistance

Much of media study work was based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1973, 1991) work. Bourdieu assessed the process of schooling in relation to art and pointed out the systematic privileging of middle-class values in education. To Bourdieu, students who arrived at school with already developed ways of approaching art tended to align with the middle class values—and thus, these students were most privileged. Students who do not have these skills were typically left behind to struggle as they revealed themselves not to belong to the upper crust of society. Bourdieu called this *Habitus*, or a class-based system of interacting with various realities and educations. In Bourdieu's analysis, schools inflicted violence onto students who did not possess the middle class *Habitus* through perpetuating the split of classes that the market relies on.

Socio-Cultural Theories of Literacy/Literacies

Reading and writing were often lumped into a solitary category. Outlawed to the libraries where quiet is mandated, or the silent writing desk, reading and writing were, for a long time, linked to a particular mode of learning which was carried out silently, in the ether, by the lone scholar. But seemingly immediately after the publication of Goody and Watt's 1968 "Consequences of Literacy," an outpouring of new perspectives of what literacy was emerged. The social theories of literacy began to frame literacy as a social process, later as many processes—that had little or no connection to schooling, that were carried out in real life by real people, and were deeply connected with a broader purpose of being a member in a community. These theories, unlike Goody and Watt, did not believe in the ultimate power of a single literacy, did not draw distinctions between "literate" and "non-literate" societies or people, and operated using ethnographic examinations that demonstrated how reading, writing, and speaking all connected in the lives of communities. Most importantly, these theories showed the political power of literacy and took away any illusion in the supposed value-free nature of literacy education.

Literacy is Social

In 1978, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole publish "Literacy without Schooling: Testing for Intellectual Effects." This ground-breaking study proposed that literacy is not necessarily an individual act, but rather, can be, and often is, the means of relating between people. Further, Scribner and Cole showed that schooling was an excellent preparation for school. In other words, the types of tasks and skills schooling promoted was necessary only for the tasks done at school and often resulted in no skill transference beyond the needs of the classroom (1978, p. 452). However, Scribner and Cole showed that literacy skills are indeed transferable to other areas of life. Scribner and Cole wrote: "what an individual does with text, or with pencil and paper, can promote specific skills that are available to support other behaviors (...) these skills are

associated with literacy, not with schooling” (1978 pp. 456-457). Evidently, literacy and schooling were not directly related, and the skills that stemmed from literacy were unique in the way they affected individuals (1978, p.457).

Scribner and Cole (1978) called for additional examinations of specific literacies that took place in various communities. Their work with the Vai revealed that literacy functioned on a social level, and resulted in the theorization that literacy functions as a practice which “may be considered to be the carrying out of a goal-directed sequence of activities, using particular technologies and applying particular systems of knowledge”(1978, pp. 457). In 1981, Scribner and Cole wrote “Unpacking Literacy” to contest the ongoing “crisis of literacy” that had been driven by media and policy makers. To begin their critique of the narrow propositions to “fix” the supposed crisis, Scribner and Cole argued that literacy must be examined contextually (2001, p. 127) to understand how the writing was to function. Their final findings criticized the fear that writing would disappear in the world of television. They stated that “social organization creates the conditions for a variety of literacy activities, and (...) different types of text reflect different social practices” (2001, p.135).

Scribner and Cole (1978, 2001) questioned the primacy of school literacy and thus created the idea that schooling and school-based literacies were deeply connected with power and status. Their work paved the way for other potent examinations of this issue, and demonstrated that schooling was politically driven, or at least had a political consequences. In 1982, Shirley Brice Heath continued to write in the Scribner and Cole tradition: her work was concerned with possible connections “oral and written language, and between literacy and its individual and social consequences” (2001, p. 348). Heath theorized “literacy events” which she believed could be used as “conceptual tools” in the process of investigating modern literacies. Literacy events

were “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interaction and their interpretive process (2001, p. 350) These events were rule governed and required participants to interact in a particular way. In other words, literacy events were not mere get-togethers with texts, but were more socially established and significant to the community and use oral language as specific forms of speech.

Heath’s work aimed to debunk the Goody and Watt (1968) literacy continuums that falsely positioned some communities as non-literate on the basis that the community members did not use school-based literacy skills in daily life. Instead, Heath showed that literacy in many communities was a socially-based practice that was not academic but served other purposes. Most significantly, Heath showed that gaining institutionally valued literacy skills was not a sure gateway into a higher socio-economic status. In fact, communities like the one Heath Brice studied, may lack opportunities for socio-economic success all together. Heath Brice also noted that the value of literacy was a socially-determined factor, and that contexts of examining any literacy in a community first begun with an examination of what that context was, particularly when trying to understand the level of control community members had over the forms of literacy used.

On the other side of the globe, and decades before the American venture into socio-cultural examinations of literacy, Lev Vygotsky theorized the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky’s ZPD work took place from mid 1920s to mid 1930s, but was unavailable to Americans due to the political tensions between USSR and USA. Vygotsky’s work positioned learning as a necessarily social act. By demonstrating that play is a key component of learning, Vygotsky was able to show that imitation and role play served as means of imagining skills that one did not yet possess: “in play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily

behavior (...) play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major form of development” (1978, p. 102). Once imagined, the skills could be practiced until mastery. The role of play was theorized as a cognitive action that young children carried out in preschool years, but continued to engage in once in the school setting. Play allowed children to gain access to the Zone of Proximal Development: a space where skills not yet mastered could be practiced with the use of imagination and often examples from life.

It was at school, Vygotsky noted, that children began to model from one another and from the teacher. At school teachers and peers become ways of allowing children to enter the Zone of Proximal Development where the learning of a new skill or ability could take place—the learner was unable to accomplish certain tasks by herself, but could do so with the help of others who were more skilled. The learner would be in ZPD until the skills could become internalized and thus learned. In fact, Vygotsky pointed to the ability of accomplishing task in ZPD as indicators of a child’s actual abilities as opposed to the actions they could perform on their own (1978, pp. 32-34). Vygotsky’s ideas showed that “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (1978, p.34).

Defining literacies. Over the course of nearly 3 decades, Brian Street worked on New Literacy Studies. Beginning in 1984, Street theorized “literacy events” and “literacy practices” to strengthen future literacy research. Street’s views about the meaning of the terms evolved, specifically due to the many ways that the two terms evolved in the scholarship. In “Literacy events and literacy practices: theory and practices of New Literacy Studies” (2001) and in “Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: approaches from New Literacy Studies” (2006), Street clarified that “literacy practices” were what a particular society believed, values, and conceptualizes reading and writing to look like. Literacy practices were thus very large and

difficult to pinpoint. In contrast, “literacy events” are observable since they are small, distinct, and could be described or even measured. Literacy events could be conceptualized as the threads that interweave to create the fabric of literacy practices. Street posited that the ultimate challenge in New Literacy Studies was finding a way of moving from observing literacy events to the work of making may literacy events connect into understanding literacy practices (2006).

A part of the challenge was, as Street showed, the ideological underpinning of any literacy. For researchers, it became crucial that the work carried out was done contextually, and this was where Street connected with Heath Brice, Scribner and Cole, as well as others working from the socio-cultural and sociocritical theories of literacy. The contextual investigation of ideologies underpinning literacy was taken up by The New London Group. In "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing social futures," The New London Group (1996) discussed a new approach to the concept of literacies that they term “multiliteracies.” This term was significant as it revealed the necessity to abandon the singular term “literacy” and to recognize the simultaneous existence of many literacies that people navigated with. Multiliteracies were also described as practices that were complex and intrinsically more challenging to operate as well as teach. The authors discussed the necessity of recognizing that the approach to literacy instruction must necessarily match the social context of the students, and that thinking in monoliths was no longer a possibility if students were to receive an education that will match their life goals.

Further, The New London Group (1996) recognized the growth and proliferation of information technology and its influence on literacy. From this perspective, the authors argued for a more socially nuanced and connected education that had cultural production as an aim. In this, the authors demonstrated the literacy trend of moving away from literacy consumption and more

towards production. Finally, the authors discussed the profound need to create a new language, what they term a grammar, to discuss what was happening in the literacy.

The topic of literacies became central to Gunter Kress (2003) who demonstrated that the presence of media in the current world changed the meaning of the term “literacy.” Flowing from the work of The New London Group (1996) Kress warned against the overt diffusion of the term and proposed that alternatives be theorized to keep the discipline and study of literacy/literacies strong. Central to Kress’ work was the distinction between “a world told” and a “world shown,” and relied on semiology in his discussion of power and the media as well as meaning and media. He demonstrated that the world was now shifting towards the “screen” which was governed by visual signs, and all writing was orienting itself to resemble this paradigm. Kress called for multimodality as a means of discussing texts that use several technologies within them: images, writing, sound, etc. all combined to make meaning. Thus, Kress posited that the 21st century saw imagination differently, “we are already in an era which may be defining imagination more actively, as the making of orders of our design out of elements weakly organized, and sought out by us in relation to our design” (2003, p. 59). Here Kress pointed out that what used to be central to communication was the pre-determined “reading path” of text that did not leave any responsibility to the reader who was left to go along with the text to make meaning. However, with multimodality, readers had to engage with the design, or the layout, of the text before them and understand what each element was, how it connected to other elements, how all elements worked with one another, and finally, how these elements worked in relation to the reader’s life. Paramount to Kress’ theory was sociality and social connections. He saw all communication as social because the texts produced and disseminated were created by people living in specific circumstances, and most importantly, for other people. In this context, the ability to craft texts

became a powerful act, just as much as reading texts was powerful. This sociality was a broadly recognize tenant of sociocultural theory and heavily theorized by scholars like Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street. Kress' work was highly influential in the writings of Buckingham who used the term "multimodality" as it was theorized by Kress to demonstrate the necessary tools young children needed in the process of understanding media.

Cultural context for literacies

Barton and Hamilton (2000, 2005) discussed their theory of literacy as inherently tied to a social context/aspect. By defining literacy as an fundamentally social act, Barton and Hamilton positioned literacy as something that was done within the context of a culture, and not separately from it: all literacy was produced because of a culture that surrounds the producers. In addition, the authors discussed the notion of "literacy event" which was what people did with literacy. Here, "literacy events" were activities carried out by groups focused on a particular text. Interestingly, the authors demonstrated and discussed the invisibility of literacy until it was revealed in the social context. Most importantly, the authors posited that what people chose to do with literacy was essentially tied with social behavior and created communities of practice. In addition, Barton and Hamilton (2000) described six principles of literacy as a social practice. What they note was the connection between literacy and power and propose that literacy was inherently tied with power, but that literacy also had a way to move beyond and through the boundaries of power structures.

James Paul Gee's (2001) work on Discourse illuminated the complexity of academic studies. As Gee noted, Discourse was not only the language a group uses: it was also the values, gestures, etc. that signaled belonging to a Discourse. Gee also noted that people were not born into Discourses—they learned them. Hence, the first Discourse, or Home Discourse, sometimes

clashed with a learned Discourse. Individuals were often put into a position where their primary and secondary Discourses did not correspond with one another and even threatened each other. Gee pointed out the difficulty of maneuvering around these tensions and proposed the concept of “identity kit” as a useful way to see oneself in different contexts with different Discursive lenses on. In this conception, Discourses became tools that one could use to communicate and that did not necessarily determine who one was or where one belonged.

Education

Kathleen Blake Yancey (2011) saw technology as a powerful tool to assist writing instructors, but she cautioned against falling into the trap of teaching formats only—computer-based literacy could not be taught in isolation. Yancey believed that teaching students to fill out blank spaces was neither useful nor responsible. What Yancey noted was that much of the genre work of technologically rich environments was currently learned outside of the classroom. The simple reason for this was that “the screen” had become ubiquitous and schools have largely ignored it. This was a tremendous loss to educators who were either ignoring technology or openly excluding it from the classroom. However, as Yancey noted, every time educators asked students to use a word processor to write a paper, they brought the technology into the classroom and thus should not abdicate their position as educator. It was up to each teacher using computer-based anything to teach about the social and political realities of using technology.

Dovetailing the discussion of non-classroom spaces that carry educational potential was the work of Coiro et al. (2014). In Chapter 1 of the *Handbook*, Coiro et. al pointed out many important historical aspects—the fast growth of the Internet, the rapid dissemination of the technology, the importance of Internet spread in areas that were economically struggling. But most importantly, the authors pointed out that it was not only the technology that had changed with the advent of

the Internet, but it was the nature of information dissemination itself: “the Internet, as a technology, permits immediate, global, and continuous change to literacy technologies themselves” (2014, p. 5). It was the essence of what literacies were that could change, not only how literacies were developed or shared. But there was a second portion to the Internet literacy equation: agency. The authors point out that “the Internet makes it possible to develop and immediately disseminate a new technology of literacy to every person who chooses to access it online” 2014, (p. 5). This may be the greatest break-through of literacy itself—the immediate yet not mandatory creation of new literacy tools and technologies were there for the taking—but only if a person wanted to engage with these new tools.

Coiro et al. (2014) build a case of the need to understand not the latest technologies that emerged on the Internet, but to rather focus on describing guiding principles that could help orient peers in their own search of answers and competencies. In essence,

literacy is no longer a static construct from the standpoint of its defining technology for the past 500 years; it has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of change in the ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose, and communicate information. (2014, p. 5).

More concretely, the authors discussed the problems inherent in literacy education vis-à-vis the Internet and acknowledged the deep problem of educators and policy makers being behind the times in their understanding or even usage of the Internet. This means that children were not being adequately prepared to understand certain issues inherent to the Internet, or even technology as a whole. As the authors note, the children who have Internet access at home were paradoxically the ones who were being prepared the least in this understanding (2014 p. 9)—these children used the Internet widely, but did not receive the critical skills necessary to

interrogate their Internet usage on a broader scale. This work was connected to the principles outlined by Buckingham (2003), Hobbs and Jensen (2009), and others who saw the study of media, and technology mediated literacies not as a canonical field (e.g. literature), but as a discipline that was responsive to the changes that would take place in technology as time passes.

Purpose driven literacies

In her work, Davies (2008) examined the literacies of shoppers and buyers on eBay. Davies focused on examining the literacy of the shoppers and buyers from the New Literacies, and New Literacies Studies perspectives by elaborating that literacy was a social act that people participated in to “get stuff done.” Davies leaned on the work of Brian Street (1993), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Cope and Kalantzis (2000) to build a framework that strongly emphasized and standards, belonging to a specific community over academic textual proficiency, and purpose-driven literacy.

Davies acknowledged the “errors” of the textual production of eBay shoppers while demonstrating that these errors were not in the least barriers to task accomplishments. In fact, Davies showed that it was the act of storytelling that took precedence over such aspects of literacy as correct spelling or grammatical cohesion. The stories were, ultimately, what sold the products on eBay and what attracted many peers to engage in the communal aspect of eBay. (229-230). The storytelling aspect of eBay was further interesting since the multimodal tools permitted peers to engage in the story process by questioning one another, engaging in the process, and ultimately making decisions about purchases. It was through this multi-modally enabled process that peers built identity and showed how these identities fit into the broader eBay community. Much of this research connected to Marshall’s (2007) findings as well as Alvermann’s (2010) and Ito’s (2013). In each of these studies, the recognition of the communal

creation of standard was revealed as a crucial component of the literacy that was practiced. In essence, the peers were the ones making the rules, as was especially evident in Yancey's (2011) work who noted that online genres were not developed by scholars, programmers, or teachers, but were rather established gradually by peers who either model their work on one another or invented the genre as they see fit. In effect, Davies enriched Yancey's work and showed yet another space where communities took on the responsibility for linguistic development and standards.

Youths

In their research, Lewis and Fabos (2005) observed seven young people using Instant Messenger in order to understand the literacies that emerged in the online environment. Lewis and Fabos identified several key themes emerging from their research: "language use, social networks, and surveillance." The first category, "language use," described the ways that young people engaged language in their IM usage. The researchers found that the language use was complex, multifaceted, sophisticated and functioned as the extension of their "studied language" and was manipulated in order to achieve interesting conversation. The researchers also documented and described the complexities of maneuvering between multiple conversations in one session and demonstrated that the moves were difficult and necessitated great skill and knowledge on the part of the peers. In effect, the peers were creating a new genre—what Yancy (2011) described in her own research as happening at the peers' own pace and for their own purposes. The second theme identified by Lewis and Fabos (2005) was social networks—the peers in the study were actively involved in creating their social networks through the usage of IM.

Ito et al. (2013) conducted an in-depth investigation of literacy practices of young adults using online tools such as Instant Messenger. Ito et al. theorized three specific areas of activity for the

young adult online literacies: hanging out, messing around, and geeking out. Each areas of activity was described as fulfilling different purposes. Hanging out was classified as an informal coming together around “friendship-driven practices” (53). Hanging out online enabled youth to digitally share music, videos, images, and texts (35-48). As well as chat and send text messages (47-52) often simultaneously with other media-activities leading to multitasking (49).

Messing around was a “more intense engagement with new media” (54). When messing around, youth were “looking around for information online” for a myriad of reasons: from finding information to complete school-based projects to looking for ways to be more successful game player (55). Looking around was the “initial base of knowledge as a stepping stone to deeper social and practical engagement with a new area of interest” which made many of the youth self-taught individuals (57). Geeking out was the last practice described by Ito et al. and was described as a deep commitment to a particular media genre that lead many of the youth to become media producers. These practices, such as intense fandoms and game-play, involved “high levels of specialized knowledge attached to alternative models of status and credibility and a willingness to bend or break social and technological rules” (66). Youth who either became engaged in writing fan fiction or illegally obtaining media could gain social status and become experts in the process of “rewriting the rules” (71).

What Ito et al. set out to discuss was the reality of the youth culture in connection to the online environment as opposed to the perceived problem of youth culture. In their literature review, Ito et al. demonstrated the extent to which youth and their media-connected activities were been “ghettoized” and stigmatized (7-12) as opposed to studied, understood or empowered. Ito et al. saw to connect their work with scholars such as David Buckingham, Henry Jenkins, James Paul

Gee, and others who contested the protectionist arguments seeking to disempower youth culture or youth media usage.

New media are a site where youth exhibit agency and expertise that often exceeds that of their elders, resulting in intergenerational struggle over authority and control over learning and literacy. Technology, media, and public culture are shaped and being shaped by these struggles, as youth practice defines new terms of participation in a digital and networked media ecology. (14)

Ito's study demonstrated how radical the skills acquired by youth using media tools can be. The use of the new media environment, particularly the Internet, for both personal as well as school and professional pursuits demonstrated that the youth were actively engaged in creating and defining modes of participation and navigating through them seamlessly. What was most striking was that these activities were not school-mediated and that youth were exploring technologies on their own. As Buckingham, Yancy, and others noted, schools often either ignore or restrict youth from engaging these powerful skills. Ito et al. demonstrated even further that the only threat of online participation was to the adult egos stuck in the authoritarian mode of education that flows from the top-down and was invested in hierarchical power structures.

Resistance

Resistance can be fostered in many ways, and schools can be one such site. As Adam J. Banks (2011) pointed out, there was a strong connection between technology and liberation. Banks argued that the silence around issues of race and the Internet further perpetuated the political and economic exclusion of minorities. However, as Banks noted, the process of empowering minorities in the technological world was complex and hinged on educational initiatives that began in the classroom, expanded to the home, and included communities. The empowerment, or

access, began with the process of providing equipment and infrastructures, but necessarily included critical education as well. It was not enough to put someone in front of a computer and hope that she would figure out how to use the computer in the process of self-liberation. It is necessary to educate people on the potentials of the technology and ways they could become active in the political process. Access, it seems, involved individuals in the process of using technology in a meaningful way, but also allowed them entrance into decision-making about the future of the technology. In this way, minorities could become agents of their own change and not be left behind both in terms of equipment needs as well as software development.

Ernest Morrell (2008) picked up the discussion of resistance in his chapter on “Cyberactivism.” Morrell demonstrated that there was no doubt that using media in the process of activism and resistance was real. He cites the Zapatistas Liberation Army, and the disruption of the World Trade Organization meeting that took place in Seattle in November 1999. Both movements were organized using media tools and both had significant political impact by bringing geographically far flung individuals together to resist political oppression: “Cyber ‘space’ allows for more democratization, as it is constituted by a logic that is both participatory in nature and interactive in terms of format” (p.146). Morrell’s work showed that the Internet in particular was playing a major part in the process of democracy because it was allowing people to connect with one another, understand various perspectives, and learn about struggles that the mass media tend to ignore. Strikingly, Morrell showed that Internet revolutionaries carry deep resentment against all stakeholders of all social institutions—educators included—for not understanding their approach to struggle and political involvement. Morrell’s work demonstrated a deep consciousness of what Banks, Buckingham and others debated all along and mediated between the protectionist and enthusiastic approaches to media education. The resistance Morrell fostered included the key

component of using the technological affordances in the space of academic improvement and in effect, turning the academic endeavors into political power.

There may be an “invisible” audience of media—computer interface peers which was what Cynthia and Richard Selfe (2011) articulated in their article “The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones.” Leaning on Mary Louise Pratt’s theory of contact zone, the Selfes constructed a discussion that showed that current design of computer interfaces was highly racists. As they demonstrated, computer interfaces were built to replicate the experience of a white-middleclass-office environment. Everything from the look of the computer desktop, to the icons appearing on it, and the functionalities within the system were mimicking the experience of working in an office. In many ways, this design pointed to the inherent racism and classism of computer design. Computers, the Selfes point out, were built for white middle class people who were familiar with the trappings of working in an office. Additionally, anyone who wished to learn how to work using a computer had to enter this environment, even if for a minute, and learn how to operate within the constraints of the system.

Most disturbingly, the Selfes pointed out that using computers actually propagates the system of modern capitalism that is Anglo-centric, rooted in middle-class rationality and exclusionary of other experiences and languages: “computer interfaces present reality as framed in the perspective of modern capitalism thus orienting technology along an existing axis of class privilege” (2011, p. 745). This system supported “imperialism master narratives,” a phrase the Selfes quote from Henry Giroux. In this arrangement, the over-reliance on positivistic values was embodied through in the linear arrangement of information that precludes any other types of thinking or filing.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is vast and invested in empowering individuals from historically oppressed, colonized or silenced communities. Postcolonial critiques have been steadily emerging in many parts of the world and serve as means of building connections between members of the same community, diasporas, or even different communities. This polyvocal, de-centered, and pluralistic outpouring continuously meets the pressures from the capitalist neo-colonial oppressors.

The Subaltern Speak

In *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle* (1998), Debord attempted to create a discussion about the spectacle, now referred to as media, from the perspective of time past. Yet, there was nothing new about this discussion, and in fact, it seemed to be woefully full of holes. Debord insisted that the media were nothing more than the propagators of “false consciousness” and that no liberation was possible through the media. This work was openly ignoring work of Franz Fanon who clearly demonstrated how mainstream media could be used to become a tool of emancipation. Debord’s work was more infuriating since Fanon was operating from the position of a “subaltern” colonial subject who was documenting the success of Algerian freedom fighters against the French empire. In fact, “This is the Voice of Algeria” (first published in 1959, and in English in 1965) was a direct challenge to everything that Debord discussed: Fanon showed that all Algerians who were able to hear the radio became actively involved in dissent against the French colonial occupation. Debord’s discussion then was a confirmation of his own prejudice against anyone who was not white. How else are we to understand his leaving out of Fanon’s powerful voice out of his discussion? Fanon offered not only proof of the efficiency of mass-media in the process of real social change, but also subverted the category of “spectator” by showing how non-white, non-privileged populations interact with media.

Pedagogies, education

Perhaps the most famous tract on education as a means to resisting oppression is Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996). The 1968 volume was originally published in Brazil and described the revolutionary idea that the oppressed people needed to educate themselves through the process of conscientização, or the process of critical consciousness. Conscientização is critical consciousness people needed to build as part of their liberation from oppression, and it is the only way to educate the oppressed without leading them onto the path of becoming oppressors. There was great “fear or freedom” in this process as the oppressed must first recognize their social position (1996, pp.17-19), and worse yet, the oppressors must recognize their own as well (1996, p.39). But without these discomforts, liberation cannot be brought to both, and in fact, the humanization of the oppressed becomes the only means possible to redeem the oppressors—a “rebirth” will become possible for all (1996, pp.40-50). Hence, a true leader of the revolution must practice co-intentional (1996, p.51) education which will not permit the domination of anyone.

Freire described in detail the need for humanizing pedagogies as opposed to the “banking model” of education that was prevalent in the oppressor’s modus operandi and assumed that knowledge could be bestowed into the inert, passive, and empty vessels that the lesser races represent (1996, pp.52-59). Freire contested that sort of view of education and stressed the importance of dialogic approaches that lead learners into critical examinations of the world around them (1996, p.52-67). It is the critical engagement, Freire said, that allows learners to discover the humanity they possess, as well as recognize the false hierarchies that have been imposed by the oppressors:

a deeper consciousness of their situation leads to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible to transformation. Resignation gives way to drive for

transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control. (1996, p.66)

The banking model, clearly, masked the historic realities and positions people in false hierarchies that are constructed as natural for the purpose of justifying and perpetuating the exploitation of the oppressed.

What was revolutionary about Freire's theory of education was not only the rejection of the top-down model of teaching, but the stressing of an ongoing learning environment for all participants. In effect, teachers become teacher-students, and students become student-teachers, because education needs to put boundless and total faith in people (1996, p.66-79).

Yet, all the dialogue was nothing without recognizing the necessity for praxis: a practical engagement of the theory, or the doing of the thinking, and the thinking about the doing (1996, p.86). There needed to be a reciprocal and ongoing engagement between actions and critical reflection, or else words become propaganda, and actions become activism both of which Freire demonstrated as being dangerous (1996, p.86-95). This was the basic method of educating the Freire outlines. Freire's pedagogy had been engaged world-wide and was reflected by the thinking of scholars such as Ito, Buckingham, Morrell, and others working in the Sociocultural and Sociocritical theories of literacy.

Central to the issues of empowerment and political struggle is the issue of language. The erasure of native language and the insistence on using the colonizer's language has a very long history indeed—it is through language that local cultures form and a people can identify as a collective. Antonia Darder and Miren Uriarte (2013) discussed the effects of restrictive language policies on students from minority groups in the United States. Darder and Uriarte showed that the policies of the Massachusetts boards of education were similar to what many colonizers did in the

process of local culture erasure (2013, p.7). The high-stakes testing tradition was synonymous with restrictive language practices and “create inordinately stressful environments for both students and teachers” (2013, p.8).

Darder and Uriarte complicated their analysis by pointing out who became most affected: the economic underclass. It was students from poor, immigrant, or marginalized spheres of the economy that became negatively affected by these policies. The most devastating consequences of the tests and policies was the creation of a new socially immobile group who would not be able to achieve economic mobility (2013, pp. 10-13). Darder and Uriarte “shattered” any illusion there may be: the U.S. was a capitalist society that needed a large working class to provide labor and services for the upper and middle classes.

Darder and Uriarte’s work demonstrated the devastating effects of the banking model of education Freire described in his work. It was evident that the socio-economic situation in the U.S. affected the educational realm resulting in oppression and perpetuation of inequality. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak showed that language, and more specifically school language, was what contributes to the “making of an American” (1990). Spivak took the discussion of language and applied it to the English major—a space that in her estimation was dominated by white male authored texts that perpetuate racist, sexist, and ethnic inequality. As Spivak noted, there was a great need for a polivocal curriculum in which texts from all social classes, from all social perspectives, and from all races were included. It was only through the radical change in the curriculum that colonization could be opposed, and it was inside of the college classroom that the making of the American perspective was forged. Lastly, Spivak called for the recognition of difference between internal colonization and colonization on the global scale. The two processes are distinctive and destructive in their own right, but that did not mean that oppression inside of

the U.S. borders ought not receive attention and be subject to liberationist action. What we needed is to “chart the production of versions of reality” as opposed to accepting a predetermined reality that oppresses.

Borders, hybridity, *mestizos*

It is nearly impossible to speak of postcolonial theory without mentioning the concepts of borders, hybridity, and *mestizos*. One of the most striking texts describing the subjective experience of a *mestiza* is Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). This 1987 text was penned by a Chicana. Anzaldua traced the ways in which the three cultures clashed in her physical, cultural, and linguistic existences and how each presented her with contradictions, challenges, and choices. As Anzaldua wrote, she moved between Standard English, to non-standard English, and into Spanish—both Mexican Spanish and Chicano Spanish. She did not translate the non-English passages, because she was forcing her reader to give her the type of linguistic and cultural concession that was frequently demanded of her (1987, pp. 76-86).

Anzaldua explicates her positionality through the act of speech. Her examination of how naming a world in one’s own tongue enables possibilities and cognitive acceptance (1987, pp. 76-86). It was also through the act of language that history was made: a history that underpins an ideology that permits exploitation, dehumanization, and theft. Here, Anzaldua was challenging Marxist theorists, like Louis Althusser, who claimed that ideologies did not have a history. Anzaldua’s work directly implicated history in the process of ideology and vice-versa. There was no coming to a peaceful solution in the borderlands—not until a stepping outside was made possible, at which point it will be the Chicanos who will chose what they want for their culture (1987, pp. 100-113). Anzaldua here stipulated that marginalized, oppressed, colonized subjects ought to

have the ability to take up, integrate, or reject all together the cultural landscapes they had been involved with so far.

The coming together of cultures was taken up by Homi Bhabha, a British educated Indian scholar, who wrote *The Location of Culture* in 1994. In this seminal text, Bhabha developed the concept of cultural hybridity that demarcated a point of struggle between two opposing cultures resulting in a new culture. This theory hinged on psychoanalytic, literary, and linguistic investigations through which Bhabha examines the encroachment of globalization, the aftermath of colonization, and questions emerging from these tensions. What Bhabha focused on was the process of creating, re-creating, narrating, and re-narrating the in-between subject arising in moments of uncertainty or clash:

It is in the emergence of these interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collaborative experience of *nationess*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (Emphasis in original 1994, p. 2).

It was in these moments of negotiation that hybridity arose and “challeng[ed] normative expectations of development and progress” (1994, p. 3).

Parallel to Bhabha’s discussion of hybridity was his instance on what the role of the postcolonial critic was: she “bears witness to those countries and communities (...) constituted ‘otherwise than modernity’” (1994, p.9). These peoples tended to be, as Bhabha described them, unhomed—displaced by history and oppression within their own land, both ignored and over-inscribed by the colonial and globalizing oppressors (1994, p. 13, 243-249). In this role, postcolonial critics were obliged to reject binaries and to embrace the “contingent and liminal” as the means for locating, expressing and contesting the historical in resisting colonialism (1994,

pp. 256-257). Bhabha opened up a space for a certain examination and presented a world in which new cultures arose. In a sense, no culture was located any-place, because all places constantly meet. Sometimes, as Bhabha showed, these meetings were consensual, but more often than not, they were violent and predicated on exploitation.

Ania Loomba challenged Bhabha's notion of hybridity directly in her 1998 book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Loomba objected to the steam rolling of colonial and oppressed subjects Bhabha engaged in. Loomba demonstrated that the theory of hybridity as presented by Bhabha did not take localities into consideration and treated colonial encounters with colonized subjects as univocal. In effect, Loomba showed that Bhabha was colonizing the colonized subjects that he purported to work towards liberating—how can he be liberating individuals if he only saw them as a gray mass? Loomba asked (1998, pp. 146-151). Loomba proposed an alternative that was steeped in alterity and subjectivities that emerged from within the oppressed cultures. It was precisely the person's ability to describe an individual experience that made her a human—and that was the means of beginning resistance against oppression and colonialism (1998, pp. 146-151).

Gender. Loomba's work connected beautifully with that of Anzaldua. Both writers were deeply concerned with the role and oppression of women's bodies and positions in the colonial project. Anzaldua's work was concerned with her womanhood through her sexuality—as a lesbian who chose not to have children, her body was a space of contested cultural oppression (Anzaldua, pp. 36-45). A woman's place was silent, servile, and fertile (Anzaldua, pp. 36-45), but also a revered symbol of the land (Loomba, pp. 180-192). The contradictions surrounding women's bodies and places were magnified by the erasure of women from the efforts to fight colonialism—and often the effort to liberate women was carried out long after the work of de-colonization was

completed. In a sense, women were the ultimate colonial subject who were vulnerable to the external control of the colonizer, but also the internal exploitation of the chauvinistic and patriarchal policies that gained momentum during colonialism (Anzaldua pp. 36-45; Loomba pp. 180-192).

Colonialism. The connection between the Internet and postcolonial/de-colonization efforts have been recognized by several scholars. Lisa Nakamura (2008) discussed the Internet as a complex player in the process of digital colonialism as well as a tool for decolonization and resistance to imperialist structures. Instead of being a one-sided enthusiast touting the all-freedom through Internet discourse, Nakamura questioned that assertion and criticized the early 90s boundless celebrations in the context of the world post 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and the 2007 economic crash. Nakamura studied several Internet phenomenon to demonstrate the simultaneous existence of two opposing forces of imperialism and anti-imperialism (2008, pp. 13-94). She began her examination by pointing out that the visual capabilities of the Internet enabled peers to create and see race in many forms (2008, pp.13-36). On the one hand, the racial construction of identity was carried out by large media producers who engaged the media environment in order to create content. In these cases, race was treated as a means of disempowering and objectifying the body that became a site for pleasure, sexual gratification, and emulation that lead to further domination of consumers (2008, p.27).

However, Nakamura also showed that the Internet had the potential to allow people under neo-colonial circumstances to self-determine (2008, pp. 20, 38-41). Through participation in online communities that shared a frame of reference (2008, p.45) enabling individuals to build networks and engage in radical media production (2008, pp.47-52). Nakamura positioned race as a code, and showed that the Internet had the capacity to show people how to deconstruct this code (2008,

pp.70-75). Here, she showed that the Internet was an ally for peers of color (2008, p.78) who had the ability to oppose the stereotypes and colonialist views about them, to create pan-racial and inter-racial empathy, or to contest any racial or ethnic associations all together. Most importantly, the Internet allowed peers to decide whether they chose to align with those promoting “nativism” or “tribalism” or with those who promoted cultural hybridity in the process of resisting neo-colonialism (2008, pp.88-94). Nakamura’s work was closely aligned with McLuhan’s as she recognized the power of the medium of the Internet—not merely for the transmission of content, but for the medium in itself. But she also opened the possibility of the Internet as a space that was undefined and that may be used for a variety of purposes. Like Morrell, she championed the community building ability of the Internet, and like Fanon, she showed that the tool of the oppressor can be turned against him.

Like Nakamura, George Landow (2006) saw the potential of the Internet to be both a democratizing and liberating tool, but also pointed to the possible dangers of the medium. Landow pointed out that the Internet was used by “former colonies (...) as means of defining and communicating a newly recreated identity” (2006, p. 345) and that the Internet could serve as a means of transmitting work done by marginalized scholars. Landow asserted that placing the work of post-colonial scholars from places like Zimbabwe not only spread their work to the West, but also “lessen[ed] the degree to which postcolonial criticism tends to repeat the pattern of colonizers, imposing cultural definitions from Europe upon local scene” (2006, p. 346). Landow showed that this mode of dissemination freed the work from local constraints, and often assisted in the effort to “evade censorship” or any other type of repressive mechanisms that local governments may deploy (2006, p. 346).

Landow pointed out that the Internet had the capacity to allow the contributors to any site to become a part of re-defining the meanings and proposes of the online spaces, while at the same time problematized the colonial impositions that still linger in the decolonized world and enabling polvocality (2006, pp. 350-356). Although Landow noted the possibilities of the online space, he was careful to also point out the issues of power and of ownership that crept into the discussion of online spaces. Like Nakamura, Landow's work was cautious and did not praise the Internet as a miracle-worker towards liberation. Landow's work outlined the possibility that hypertext should be the default mode of postcolonial work as it was far more complex than text, but he was also calling attention to the issues of form and deployment.

The values and politics of the Internet were a central concern in Maryanne Franklin's *Postcolonial Politics, the Internet, and Everyday Life: Pacific Travelers Online* (2004). Franklin worked from the assumption that there were two visions and understandings of the Internet: the corporate space for selling and buying, and a non-corporate space where "everyday life" activities take place (2004, pp.1-3):

the Internet is where people talk-write about their daily lives, confront political and social issues of the day, and muse on their (mutual) hopes and fears in what are spontaneous, negotiated sorts of intercultural and intracultural exchange." (2004, p.3)

These spaces enabled peoples from the same cultural background, but differing localities, to become linked in the "unique" way of the Internet space—that was what made these discussions Intracultural. Intercultural, on the other hand, was defined here as the communication between various social groups.

Franklin focused on demonstrating the scope and focus of "everyday life" activities were for peoples of Pacific islands, and their Diasporas. Working with Michael de Certeau's work on

“everyday life,” Franklin showed that the Internet served as a tool to help many Pacific Island peoples to produce discourses about themselves, their lives, and the representations that others made about them (2004, pp. 73-105). Even the online/offline dichotomy was questioned as the Internet became a space where “doing” of traditionally object-categories took place: race, gender, class, sex, etc. (2004, pp. 136-167). This mode of discourse showed a resistance to the predetermined means of representation that were often pushed onto people. For the Samoans, Tongans, Hawaiians, and their diasporas, the non-corporate Internet was a deeply political space where communication was not only a daily and significant event, but also a space to contest political and colonial oppressions (2004, pp. 106-135).

Literature Review Importance

Through this literature review, I worked to show how Critical Media Studies, Socio-Cultural Theories of Literacy/Literacies, and Postcolonial Theory are necessary components to building a theory that addresses the intersections of information technology use, shifts in college student body make-up, and ways college students use information technology to engage in self-driven literacy building processes. It is no longer sufficient to look at the way college students build literacies without seeing the group as a vastly fractured body made up of pluralistic subjects who embody diverse subjectivities. It is also not enough to study literacies in a disconnected vacuum of the educational world or the world at large—the two types of studies need to become intertwined to truly represent the context that the literacies are being built in. The three components of my theoretical framework work together to provide a broad-ranging basis for understanding the literacies themselves, the socio-cultural context for the literacies building, and the technological criticism necessary to problematize the participations in online settings.

As The Perfect Storm arrived in the U.S. colleges, most educators were caught by surprise, and some have still not noted the realities that surround student lives. It is important to stress how perilous it is for educators to maintain a hands-off approach to the issues connected with student digital lives, especially in the globally connected world. The 2016 election meddling was only one example in a sea of events that were neither predicted nor can be fully prevented. However, as educators, we did not foresee the possibility, even though the Arab Spring happened many years before. As educators, how many discussed the problematic power of the Internet and its discursive potentials in our classes? And if we did, how connected did we make our discussions to the socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic lives of the students in our classes? To answer these questions better in the future, I constructed a theoretical background for my study that would attempt to weave a more complex and textured backdrop to any analysis, or a sail to traverse the troubled waters with.

CHAPTER 3

DATA COLLECTION AND STUDY DESIGN

The goal of this dissertation was to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do college students utilize asynchronous online discussion spaces?
2. In what ways, if at all, are the social, educational, and professional literacies developed through participation in AODS?
3. What types of interactions, if any, do AODS enable and hinder for college students?
4. How, if at all, do various college populations value AODS usage?

To begin the process, I developed a series of protocols that were qualitative, self-reflexive, and participant-driven. In order to serve my participants, I had to first place myself in the project—to understand who I was to undertake this study.

Researcher's Role

Who am I to do this research? I already mentioned my fascination with the learning that my husband did. But being a curious researcher/wife is not the positionality that informs and influences major parts of my researcher role. To begin answering “who are you?” I always start with a place: Poland. I am a Polish immigrant who came to the United States at 15. One of the issues I had to grapple with was the emerging trend of teens using the Internet to communicate with one another. Although we had a computer at home, I was not really curious about it until I felt peer pressure mounting from multiple sides. On the one hand, my classmates were deeply interested in using the Internet with one another, and ridiculed anyone who did not want to participate. On the other hand, my older brother was constantly using the Internet to

communicate with friends back home, and to make new friends online. I felt left behind, scrambling, and frustrated with my inability to comprehend the medium.

The suburban school I attended did not have any classes that engaged with a critical discussion of the Internet, and so I was left alone to figure out how to use it, and what to use it for. I eventually discovered several online spaces that connected me with others—I was able to begin exploring parts of my identity and literacies that were neither supported by school endeavors nor interesting to my classmates. Today, I see myself as a postcolonial subject who was trapped in a borderland between an idealized past and a vilified present. The Internet was somewhat of a help, but I did not engage with it as fully as I could have, and since I had to share my home computer with my siblings, I did not have much time to do the types of deep-dives and page hopping that were popular at the time.

So I did the only thing I knew to do—I observed what others did. Throughout this research, I did the same thing: I engaged in a process of gathering information from my participants and I was keenly aware that many of the issues discussed resembled my own experiences in some way. In fact, the inclusion of the postcolonial discussion is a nod to my past and to the participants who share similarities with my own experiences. I also see that my insistence on including digital literacies into curricula is a response to missing this education throughout high school and college. I believe that I am an early example of The Perfect Storm, and I am troubled that it is nearly 20 years since I began college, and still, colleges are not prepared to serve people like me, my husband, or many of my participants.

Mode of Research

This qualitative project (Bogdan and Biklen “Qualitative”, 2007 p. 5) includes two data sets: student survey, and semi-structured interviews. The interview and survey are deeply concerned

with the perspective of the participants and the ways they understand the world (Luttrell, 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 2001 pp.7-8). I chose to design this study to use several data-collection methods in order to create a more complex representation of the phenomenon of online discussion spaces. Multiple data collection strategies in qualitative research are common (Maxwell, 2013 p. 102; Marshall & Rossman 2006, pp. 162-163) to develop “complementarity” and “expansion” (Greene, 2007 pp. 101-104) as means of expanding understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000 p. 5).

Sampling

There population being sampled is the undergraduate student body of Pace University, a private university in a Northeast city. The initial sampling strategy is Patton’s (1989) convenient sampling strategy: this is the undergraduate population that I am in close proximity to and that I can reach personally. I justify this sampling strategy simply: I am interested in finding out more about this particular student group in this particular University since I have been teaching this population since 2007, and will continue to do so in the future. This sampling is not only convenient, but also purposeful (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 p. 73; Palys, 2008; Maxwell, 2013). However, once the initial sample was identified based on convenience, I engaged in snowballing sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 p. 72; Luttrell, 2000, p. 7) where I asked my participants to identify potential other participants for me to contact.

The sampling process began with the recruitment of participants for the survey portion of the study. The recruitment process began with a word-of-mouth campaign: I spoke to all classes I instructed as well as asked colleagues to allow me to speak to the classes they taught to find interested students. The second stage was an e-mail campaign: I reached out to students I have taught in the past through the e-mail lists I have access to through the Blackboard academic

system. I also posted invitations to participate using social media (Facebook and Instagram). I asked that my recruitment message be re-posted in order to gather as many student participants as possible.

Survey participants. 84 participants took part in the survey. The survey participants self-identified as follows:

- 72 went to college right after high school
- 3 took a break of at least 3 years between high school and college
- 6 were veterans
- 1 dropped out of high school and obtained a GED before starting college

Interview participants. At the end of the survey, I asked that participants self-identify for the interview portion of the study. 12 participants volunteered for the interviews.

Oliver. Oliver was a veteran, non-traditional student, a proud father of 3 daughters, and one of the meekest people I ever met. I met Oliver while teaching a class about the intersections of gender and popular culture. Oliver self-identified as poor and talked about growing up in the inner city. He was also Hispanic, though he did not often discuss that part of his identity. Oliver was trying to be a business major.

Ian. Ian was a non-traditional student who dropped out of high school and college before traveling and finally restarting college. Ian was a strong personality who became surprisingly nervous during the process of interviewing. Ian was a white man who grew up in a single-parent household that he described as lower-middle-class. Ian majored in information technology.

Michael. Michael was a traditional student whom I met when teaching first year English. He was an African American man who discussed growing up in the Bronx. He was one of the most thoughtful and soft spoken people I ever met. Michael was a psychology major.

Rose. Rose grew up in Florida in a single-parent household. She was a traditional student who received multiple scholarships and was on her way to graduate school at the time of the interviews. She majored in English. Rose was a first generation college student.

Susan. Susan grew up in New York City. She was a traditional student who majored in English and was on her way to graduate school at the time of the interviews. Susan hoped to work in publishing after graduation. She was a first generation college student.

Daniel. Daniel was a traditional student who experienced an interruption in college education. Due to illness, he had to take a leave of absence while recuperating. Daniel grew up in a single parent and immigrant household. Daniel's first language was Spanish. Daniel was a business major and wanted to operate a café after graduating from college. I met Daniel when teaching English Across the Disciplines course.

John. John was a traditional student who was a business major. His greatest passion was wrestling and he trained at the semi-professional level since high school. I met John while teaching a course that examined the intersections of gender and popular culture—the same course Oliver took, but a few semesters prior.

Sami. Sami was a traditional student who's Indian parents insisted he went to college. Sami operated a computer software company since he was in high school. His company employed over 50 programmers and outsourced work to India, China, and Australia at the time of the interviews. I met Sami while teaching English Across the Disciplines course.

Sean. Sean was a traditional student who's parents were Polish immigrants. He was a business major who took two classes with me. Sean was a business major with a strong work ethic, and a string of accolades and internships under his belt. Sean planned on working in finance after graduating from college.

Tom. Tom was a traditional student who majored in information technology. He was disillusioned with schooling and spoke with disgust about the disservice he experienced in high school and college. Tom wanted to work as a video editor once he graduated from college.

Robert. Robert was a non-traditional and veteran student who started and dropped out of college several times before arriving at Pace. He had moved around the country for deployments and for self-exploration. Brought up in Evangelical communities, Robert struggled with reconciling his Christian faith and gay identity. At the time of the interview, Robert was facing the difficult decision of whether to reenlist in the military. He was close to the retirement mark, but feared getting deployed for the 4th time. At the time of the interview, Robert was applying to Seminaries across the United States.

Justin. Justin was a traditional student who had an impeccable work ethic and self-discipline. Justin was a communications science major who wanted to work as a social media coordinator after graduating from college. At the time of the interviews, Justin already completed multiple internships, and held two jobs on campus.

Interview analysis

Telling stories is a meaning-making process that allows people to selectively tell what they will share, or more precisely, what they want to describe in the process of understanding (Seidman, 2006, p. 7-9). There is great power in telling stories (Mattingly, 1998). The interview is thus a research method choice aimed at asking participants to selectively share—and in the process, to reconstruct (Seidman, 2006 , p. 15) as opposed to remember (Tagg, 1985) what might have taken place in their past. Thelen (1989) posits that all recall is a reconstruction, and the value of reconstruction is “partially [based] on memory and partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past event” (Tagg, 1985 p.88).

For the purposes of this study, all interviews are framed according with Lankshear and Knobel's definition of spoken data (2004): "any stretch of oral language recorded" (p. 173). In order to meet this criteria, all interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and while the interview was in process, I will took supplemental notes to both guide my ability to proceed with Spradley's (1979) and contextual interviewing techniques. Based on the notes and participant answers, I constructed interview questions as the interviews unfolded, and as further interviews come up.

All interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted at the participants' convenience. The interview process and construction were based on Fontana and Frey's (2005) essay "The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement," in order to build an empathetic environment that brought focus and gives agency to the study participants. Further, "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans " (p.118) and "a constructed site of knowledge" where two (or more) people discuss an issue that is of interest to them both. "*Inter view*" becomes a literal way for both persons to exchange their inner views (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009 p.2). Thus, breaking the ice and "friendly chatting" (Fontana & Frey, 2005 pp.139) were followed with Spradley's (1979) method of interview question development in order to build interview questions that were derived from the answers given by the participants. Spradley's (1979) method includes the following types of questions:

- Grand-tour: broad questions intended to allow the participant to provide a clear context of the phenomenon being discussed, and more specifically, their participation in the phenomenon the interviewer wanted to know about (e.g. tell me about your experiences with online discussion spaces)

- Mini-tour: Questions derived from the Grand-tour that are intended to allow the participant to refine and explain more deeply specific points pertaining to the phenomenon being studied (e.g. why do you participate in Reddit?)
- Example: the participant is asked to provide specific examples of their experiences with the phenomenon being studied (e.g. can you give me an example of trolling?)
- Experience: the participant is asked to describe specific experiences gained from the phenomenon being studied (e.g. what skills did you gain from discussing feminism on *Jezebel*?)
- Native-language: the participant is asked to define any language that is used in relation to the phenomenon being studied (eg: what does “noob” mean?)

In addition to Spradley’s (1979) method of question construction, I followed Lankshear and Knobel’s (2004) guidelines for construction of interview questions: be as specific, as single-topic, and as culturally sensitive as possible (p.206). Most importantly, I asked open-ended questions to encourage participants to describe their experiences and share their perspectives in ways they see appropriate (Lankshear and Knobel 2004 p. 206). I also used Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) advice to encourage story-telling to motivate descriptions and to place the participant in the expert role (pp.105- 107). The descriptive stories told by participants were then scrutinized using probe questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 pp.104-107) to ensure that I have the definitions, meanings, and specifics of the participants’ thoughts recorded.

The interview materials are framed as “contrived” data (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006) since they were produced specifically for this study. The purpose of using interviews is to obtain the participants’ understanding of their own participation in the online discussion spaces: the

definitions they came up with for their participation, their impressions of the benefits and/or detriments of participating in the online discussion spaces, and to get a glimpse into an insider's perspective (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006).

All interviews were analyzed beginning with the process of data collection (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), since I had to make critical decisions about what to ask during the interview itself. Transcription was the next step of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 pp.129-131). All interviews (Honan et. al, 2000) were transcribed verbatim (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.268) in order to capture gestures and other non-verbal cues. However, as Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, all transcribing is really translating where the researcher serves the role of translating what she interprets from sound and notes into a representation (2006, pp. 163-165).

The process of data coding began by numbering all lines of interview transcript, and identifying broad patterns in the initial process of naming parts of the interviews (Maxwell, 2013 p.105). Once key relationships in the data were identified, the process of categorical analysis (Rose and Sullivan, 1996 p. 232) began: an iterative process (Corsaro, 1981), otherwise called "inductive" (Bogdan & Biklen 2007 p.106) of data analysis where relationships between data are identified, named, and applied as labels (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 pp.173-180) to the transcripts. In this process, seeing the data many times in order to make sense of it from multiple angles took precedence over top-down coding analysis. In order to strengthen Corsaro's (1981) method, I used Luttrell's (2000) 3-step approach to coding interview data and applied this method to all data sets. Luttrell (2000) discusses the need to have over-arching ideas that can be used as particular ways of reading to understand. Each overriding idea should be big and should be strong enough to order the data in a particular way. For this study, I read using the following 3 ideas:

- individual social experiences of the online environment
- inter-relational social experiences of the online environment
- personal perception of learning done by the self

Each theme positioned the data in a particular order and helped to reveal additional information from the already thematically coded data sets.

Survey analysis

The data collected through the student survey serves several purposes: to find out whether undergraduate students are aware of asynchronous online discussion spaces, why do they use these spaces, and how are they using those spaces. The surveys were designed to mimic online discussion spaces: each question is open-ended and participants were able to answer in any way they wish; the survey was distributed using Qualtrix (survey/survey building and distribution tool) which guaranteed anonymity to all participants. The 20 question survey took about 20 minutes of the participants' time (see Appendix A for a full list of questions).

To create questions that mimic online discussion spaces, I followed Maxwell's (2013) advice on creating interview questions. As per Maxwell (2013), survey questions are intended to be open-ended, and as un-leading as possible. I did not ask questions seeking specific data, but rather questions that were clear and served as encouragement for the participants to reflect on their experiences on their own terms (pp.100-104). In addition, I added Flick's (2000) approach of asking questions in the present tense to elicit responses that are general because I am interested in the participants' own theories of the behavior and experiences. Flick (2000) describes that participants think through their answers in a specific way—a more theoretical way—when they are presented with present-tense questions as opposed to past tense questions (which encourage remembering), or future tense (which encourages speculation). Finally, to

recognize that I am not the only person with imagination (Lutrell, 2000 p.9) I left the answer spaces as open as possible to encourage my participants to be as creative and imaginative as they want with answer content and format.

Data derived from the survey was viewed as contrived (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.176) and was treated as “written data” (Lankshear and Knobel 2006 p. 177) despite the possibility that some responses were casual enough to classify them as “spoken data.” For the purposes of this study, survey answers were analyzed separately using iterative/inductive (Corsaro, 1981; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007 pp.173-180) techniques for developing codes. For this section of data analysis, I relied on Kress’ (1985) work on discourse in order to stress that the survey participants are not isolated beings, but social agents who operate in “networks of social relations” where common language, practices, and values are shared (Kress, 1985 p. 6). Kress’ (1985) work helped to investigate the discourse that is created by undergraduate students about participation in online spaces. Specifically, the values, ideas, and practices that are established by this group of people: Discourses are systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say. (p. 6). I am most interested in how undergraduates see their participation in online discussion spaces—hence, I framed this part of analysis as discourse analysis of written data derived in a contrived way.

Connecting analysis

In order to reflect and process all findings, research memos (See Appendix B) were written after every interview, interview transcription, reading of interview transcript, interview coding sessions, reading of survey responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Not only did the

memos serve as a space to reflect, theorize, connect, and analyze, but they facilitated the key ability to perform connecting analysis (Maxwell, 2013 p. 104-105). As opposed to immediate analysis of separate data sets, connecting analysis lead the researcher to step back and see the larger emerging picture. It is important to me as researcher to produce studies that resist fracturing based on data collection strategy—I seek to present analysis that recognizes where the information came from, but I am also invested in demonstrating the broader emerging patterns in the context they may appear in (Maxwell, 2013).

Reciprocity

Asking people to give up their time is a serious request that demands equivalent repayment. I have attempted to build reciprocity through several means:

- I have offered my tutoring, editing, and teaching services to all participants. I offered to tutor class assignments, help with composing job-related documents, and assistance in the graduate school application process.
- I have offer my time and help with registering for classes, navigating institutional issues, and selecting career/educational paths.
- I have also given small gifts (pens) to all participants to mark my gratitude and the culmination of the participants' labor in the research project (Seidman, 2006; Maxwell, 2013).

Duty to Participants. As a social oddity (how often do you see a Polish immigrant teaching English? How often does she have to shrug at hearing “But you have no accent!!”?), I am committed to building spaces that are comfortable, and welcoming to all who wish to learn. I thus believed that all who participated in my study became more than participants: they are stake-holders in the research, and in my success. I am indebted to them, and so I am committed

to maximize the power of my participants in this research process. As per Fontana & Frey (2005) I worked to build an empathetic space, attempted to build a relationship with my participants, and attempted to give the participants a maximum level of control and input into the study as “member checks” and on-going input was sought from all interview and survey participants. Member checks permit the researcher to ensure that the participants are represented as they wish to be represented and provides additional evidence that is as valid as the initial data collection (Maxwell, 2013).

Informed Consent. For the purposes of this study “participants” are all persons who will be asked to provide answers to questions or prompts. All persons are over the age of 18 and were asked to review the study perimeters before participating. I asked all participants to consent after being informed therefore observing the principles of informed consent as specified by the standards of Institutional Review Boards Columbia University. This procedure was built into the study to ensure that participants were not harmed, discomforted, or uninformed about what their role in the research process was (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Lankshear and Knobel 2006). The interview participants were presented with a physical copy of the informed consent form and an electronic link to the same document. Interview participants were asked to provide a signature on the informed consent forms. Survey participants were presented with an electronic informed consent form before moving forward to the survey questions. Survey participants were asked to agree therefore providing an electronic signature. Survey participants received a link to an electronic copy of the consent form as well.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“I learn about other people's perspectives and it opens my mind a lot more”

- Survey Participant

As I sat with my first interview participant, I realized just how nervous I was. I had prepared several questions based on preliminary survey results, but I was unsure of how the interview would proceed, whether I would ask the right questions, and whether I even knew what I was doing. But one thing kept running through my mind: this study matters, and my job was to ensure that I represented my participants as clearly and as close to their own words as possible. I looked over the survey results again, jotted down a few more notes, and then my participant arrived. Although it may seem that data collection is the simplest and most straight-forwards process in the dissertation, I felt that it was the most high-stakes, and challenging stage of the process. For me, the data collection process was an exercise in humility. After all, each participant gave me their time despite school, work, and family obligations. They found something about this project that was worthwhile, and I knew that I had to do my best to understand how they perceived their online activities, and in turn, to show the world how powerful this group was.

Even before the first interview I conducted, I already saw a profound need to unlearn many of my own assumptions. From the survey results, it seemed my participants did not perceive their online participation as divided by modality or technological capabilities. Although “going online” may not seem as a unified activity, and although “going online” may seem like discreet types of activities, for my participants, “going online” was a metaphor for understanding what

they did in total. The participants in this study did not see participating in separate spaces as different, but rather as various components of the same activity. Asynchronous participation was merely a part of the overall online participation. The participants did not necessarily see their participation in asynchronous spaces as all that different from participation in social media, or even googling information. Seemingly, the literacy of online spaces I was conceptualizing initially, was already a multiliteracy (New London Group, 1996) and served a variety of purposes (Heath Brice, 2001; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 2003) I did not envision at the start of the study. Though participants were able to name several variances between the modalities (Kress, 2003; Buckingham, 2003; Davies, 2008; Vasudevan, 2006; Rowsell & Walsh, 2011; Kress & Jewitt, 2003) and outcomes of participation, they did not necessarily see the spaces as separate. Rather, to them, asynchronous spaces are a part of the greater whole of “online” where social media, asynchronous exchanges, and web searches take place. The entirety of the online universe, thus, emerged as a literacy practice (Street, 2003). The whole Internet, and the myriad of spaces it contains, is in itself immeasurable simply because of how rapidly it changes (Alvermann, 2008). The Internet happens all the time as well—it is simply uncontainable by the human mind, though it is contained on servers and understandable to machines. Each online space, however, can be observed and certain shared behaviors can be identified. Hence, each forum or even type of online space can be viewed as a literacy event (Heath Brice, 2001; Street, 2003).

This chapter begins by examining participant ideas about what various Internet spaces might look like, what can be accomplished, how proprietary and non-proprietary spaces compare, what the rules and regulations in communities are and how peers shape discourse communities that arise in AODS. A key discussion centered around the global reach of AODS and the issues of

moderation in various spaces. This section lays out the foundation for the understanding of the technological, discursive, and communal aspects of AODS.

Spaces and possibilities

Internet spaces are a fascinating nexus of technology and social participation. On the one hand, there are the complex architectures involving countless lines of code, servers, and other machinery. On the other hand there are the people using a range of machines to accomplish a variety of tasks. As complex as machinery is, the human aspect can be even more complex. The world of online spaces affords as many possibilities for personal transformation as it does for being bullied. After all, the technology is not only created with a bias towards English speaking and educated masses, but is also used by many racists, sexists, and homophobic individuals. The very notion of democratizing information through the use of online spaces is a problematic proposition since many voices are drowned out, and malicious misrepresentations of truth often prevail. Despite these realities, the Internet has the potential to be a powerful force in a person's life and could facilitate the development of many literacies. People who chose to engage in online discussions, reviews, or comments may face initial difficulties in the online environment, but the AODS have the potential to assist beginner communicators with developing multiple literacies through their built-in features and purposes.

The terminology used to describe AODS is highly coded and needed to be demystified before further analysis could take place. To begin, the term "space" evokes a physical place where things could happen. "Space" can also mean outer space where no air exists, planets rotate, and black holes swallow entire realities. "Space" has recently become a term used to describe pauses, thoughts, and feelings as well. There is a measure of physicality that the term attaches to whatever phenomenon is being coded. An early way to describe asynchronous online spaces is

online forums. A forum is another term that denotes a physicality, but also it denotes a meeting of people who are assembled in order to speak listen, and communicate. The term forum has a long tradition and dates back to ancient Rome. Forums were town squares that became the center of judicial, political, and civic activity (Purcell, 1989). Only citizens had the right to speak—women, slaves, and lower classes were excluded from making decisions. Hence, only Roman men had the ability to participate in the forum discussions and decision making. The term itself, then, denotes a racist and sexist reality of the early democratic and bureaucratic processes.

Despite their imperfections, AODS emerged as spaces that enabled participants to engage in social growth. A major feature of the AODS identified by participants was the Internet environment which was contrasted with the physical world: the Internet enabled participants to trial behaviors without the stress of facing another human. Survey participants discussed the explicit process of developing social skills online. One participant said: “I believed you have a potential to develop some social skills in an online discussion. I think given time someone could transfer those skills into the real world.” The key point in this response was the concept of transfer into what the participant described as the “real world.” Here, the participant drew a sharp contrast between the artifice of the constructed online space and the spontaneity of daily, physical life. Specifically, AODS were described as disembodied and disconnected temporally which created a less stressful environment for participation.

Another participant confirmed my analysis by saying that online participation provided “understanding [of] the diffusion between online and in-person behavior.” Why is this distinction important? AODS provide the time peers needed in order to process the social, technological, and textual situation. As with anything, some parts of the skills might eventually become more automated, and less time might be needed to process the writing being encountered. There is no

such affordance in the physical world, and a re-experiencing of a situation is not possible (unless a time machine is available). Hence, with even more time, beginner communicators might develop the savvy necessary to move from the lag-rich environment of comments and reviews and into the real-time space of face-to-face conversation.

Participants elaborated on the environmental affordances even further by noting that AODS give peers lag to process before issuing a response, or even to understand what is being said. As another participant wrote: AODS provide “feedback and different points of views. Room for improvement.” Another participant remarked that online discussions and comments are “social skills in its most basic form because it isn't face to face interaction.” Indeed, these responses speak directly to the benefits of the built-in lag because “room” is precisely what online discussions give.

Coupled with the ability to slowly compose posts (Marshall, 2007; Yancey, 2011; Jenkins 2008, 2009), online spaces give peers a literal shield in the form of the disembodied machinery needed to participate (Selfe & Selfe, 2011). Whether on a smart phone, a laptop, or desktop, the “screen” present might embolden many peers, for better or for worse. Although online spaces might seem as liberationist in their nature, and although they might seem as a way to combat colonial repressions of local cultures, the reality at hand is more complex and can actually lead to colonial repression of subaltern cultures (Morrell, 2008; Banks, 2011; Fanon, 1994). The survey participants remarked on this aspect, and one participant said

I think aside from the negatives of online commenting, there are also a lot of positives like people feeling a little more free to speak their mind without being afraid of the judgment they might receive if they were in class, in front of a bunch of

people speaking. So I learn about other people's perspectives and it opens my mind a lot more.

So here, the shielding process is an asset to the broader community. Not only are “shy” individuals given a space to voice opinions, but anyone willing to engage has a chance to speak back to power, and develop ways to reach conscientização (Freire, 1996). The “shy” peers get a chance to educate others, add their voices to the conversation, and not feel invisible (Morrell, 2008; Banks, 2011). Quite extraordinarily, by writing online comments and discussions, peers have an opportunity to leave a lasting mark that is recorded forever. As 35 of participants noted, once content goes up online, it never goes away. Realistically, even if deleted, comments and reviews are stored on servers and are part of a durable record of human interaction and knowledge. Although the proposition of everlasting contribution to the whole of human knowledge might seem enticing, the reality might also be frightening as “sins of our past” cannot be drowned. Hence, though AODS have the potential to empower peers, the same spaces have the potential to seriously harm peers who have not been properly prepared to use the Internet responsibly. For instance, in 2017, Harvard University rescinded admission to several students who posted racist remarks online (Kamendz, 2017).

Although lag is a crucial feature of AODS, it is not the only feature described by the participants. Multimedia components were also mentioned and discussed as a “naturally existing” part of the AODS: gifs, emojis, bitmojis, hyperlinks, video, and music were named as crucial and frequently used components of AODS by 67 survey participants. All interview participants discussed using multimedia components in their online participation as well. Not each AODS space had the capacity to include all of the multimedia components, as noted by the participants, and 34 survey participants said they avoided spaces that did not include multimedia

features while 12 were not bothered by “missing” multimedia components. So what are these formats? Gifs, short of Graphic Interchange Format, (the jury is still out on the correct pronunciation) are short, looping videos typically derived from longer material. Gif was invented in 1987 by Steve Wilhite and has come to prominence with the advent of the World Wide Web (Boissoneault, 2017). Emoji are still graphics that can be inserted into text. Initially a feature on Japanese cellphones created by Shigetaka Kurita in 1999 (Prisco, 2018), emoji have been described as a “primitive language ... [that] represent the first language born of the digital world, designed to add emotional nuance to otherwise flat text” (Padres, 2018). Bitmoji are cartoon avatars which became popular in 2016 and have been described as digital stand-ins used to recapture the human aspect of digital communication (Kruger, 2016). Both survey and interview participants agreed that using these multimedia components was an important part of their participation as it allowed for an expanded “vocabulary” to express a variety of ideas.

It is no wonder that participants discussed the existence and importance of the multimedia components. As the participants note, the standard for digital communication has expanded far beyond text, and the prevalence of non-textual components is a given to any user of online spaces. AODS are thus no exception, though many spaces might be limited in supporting multimedia tools. What was a given across all spaces discussed by participants was the prevalence of hyperlinks. Used for a variety of purposes, the hyperlink was presented as a means of achieving inter-platform and intra-platform referencing. In a direct way, AODS were described as spaces that build information and expand it to reach other spaces such as websites, videos, and even other discussions. 45 participants pointed out that the hyperlink is an integral means of tracing information and providing support for arguments. Additionally, 11 interview participants pointed out that the hyperlink is the fastest means of providing support or refutation

of information in AODS. Hence, though a basic function, the hyperlink seems to be the most robust tool that peers have at their disposal when writing in AODS.

Discussions and reviews site architecture thick descriptions

Online discussions can be carried out in a plethora of ways, including discussion boards (like Reddit and Quora), comments sections that follow articles and blog posts, and even via product or service reviews. To understand forums better, a closer look at what they look like and what they make possible was useful. In the data collection for my 2014 Pilot Study, I found that

Reddit was the self-described “front page of the Internet.” Reddit was broken-down into a countless number of subreddits that could be started by any registered Reddit user. Thus, Reddit itself was filled with many competing points of view. Each subreddit was governed by a set of rules the forum creator posts. Hence, the ways to participate were highly controlled and enforced by the forum moderators who were not paid for their work... [peers] could upvote and downvote posts.

As an example of a subreddit, I chose r/worldnews. Figure 1 is a screen-grab of the Reddit front page from April 14, 2018, and a thread from r/worldnews along with the subforum rules:

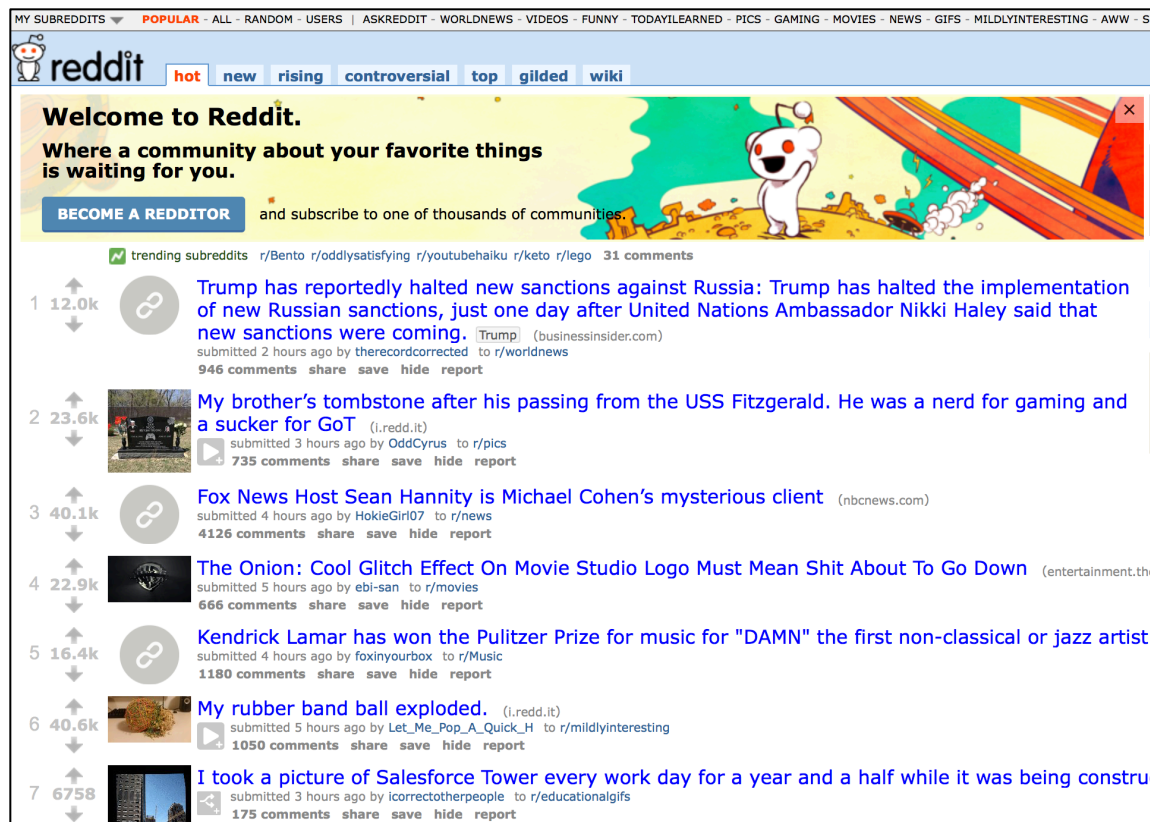


Figure 1: Screen shot of Reddit Front Page from April 14, 2018

As visible in Figure 1, the top banner of the page features links to the most popular and most visited subreddits that any page visitor can access. Anyone with Internet access can read content on Reddit. The next level of the page is the image banner with tabs that hone in on what the front page features. Content from subreddits appears on the front page based on user votes. The front page of Reddit, therefore, features the topmost voted on content from across all subreddits.

The image banner features the logo of the page features Snoo, the alien mascot of the site. Snoo is waving in the distance, as though to the readers, and seems to be inviting anyone to make contact. Non-members are invited to become members of the site. Once a member, anyone can make posts to any subreddits. Under Snoo's banner, a list of most popular posts appears. The blue text leads to the subject of the discussion. Next to the blue text, on the left hand side appears a number with an arrow above and an arrow below. Those numbers indicate the number of times

the content has been upvoted. The arrows give members the ability to place a vote: either Approving (upvoting) or Disapproving (downvoting). The front page is dynamic and the content will move after enough members have placed their votes.

The votes become a measure not only of the content's strength or interest to the Reddit community, but become "property" of the original poster who gains notoriety with each upvote. There is also Reddit Gold—a membership program that provides funding to the site, as well as the a function that allows the payer to give Gold to another redditor. Redditors do not necessarily have to be Gold members to give Gold to others. Some of the reasons Redditors Gild one another is to reward good writing, good membership, and to make another member happy. But on occasion, giving gold is a way to show disapproval or to make fun of a redditor (Peyser, 2016). Reddit Gold gifted by another member is another way to build notoriety and to create community.

Under the blue text that leads to the content of the discussion are action links that lead towards more content: the gray text with a number in front of it that reads "comments" leads to the tabbed discussion on the content linked to above. Figure 2 is a screen shot of the r/worldnews from April 14, 2018:



Figure 2: Screen shot of r/worldnews from April 14, 2018

As demonstrated by Figure 2, the subreddit page r/worldnews is nearly identical to the front page. There are additional tabs unique to the subreddit on top of the Snoo banner and lead to associated spaces of the r/worldnews subreddit. In addition, similar subreddits are linked to on the top of the Snoo banner. Below the Snoo banner is a large invitation asking readers to join the conversation by submitting the comments, and underneath that is the discussion itself. Much like the front page, the content in the subreddits is featured based on popularity: the comments with most points appear towards the top. And like the front page, all logged in members can vote on any comment thus helping it move up, or sinking it to the bottom. The top 200 comments are featured on the front page of the subreddit (as indicated above the invitation to comment), and so the top 200 are most visible. To vote, peers click on the arrows that are on the left-side of the comment above and below the number of points a comment has garnered. Each upvote is a point,

and each downvote takes a point away. The counting does not stop at zero, and a comment can have as many points below zero as the community determines. As Ian pointed out, unpopular comments get sunk to the bottom quickly, and the same happens with any content that reaches the front page as an organized effort by one of the subreddits. Ian's description here refers to a particular trolling technique where peers of usually vitriolic subreddits join together to upvote racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise hateful content just to get it to the front page. However, as Ian discussed, once this content surfaces, the overall Reddit community tends to "sink" the unwanted rather quickly.

Each subreddit is governed with a unique set of rules that is clearly specified on the front page of the subreddit for all to see. In the case of r/worldnews, the right-hand banner is bright pink and features the below description (see Figure 3 for an example of community rules in a reddit forum):

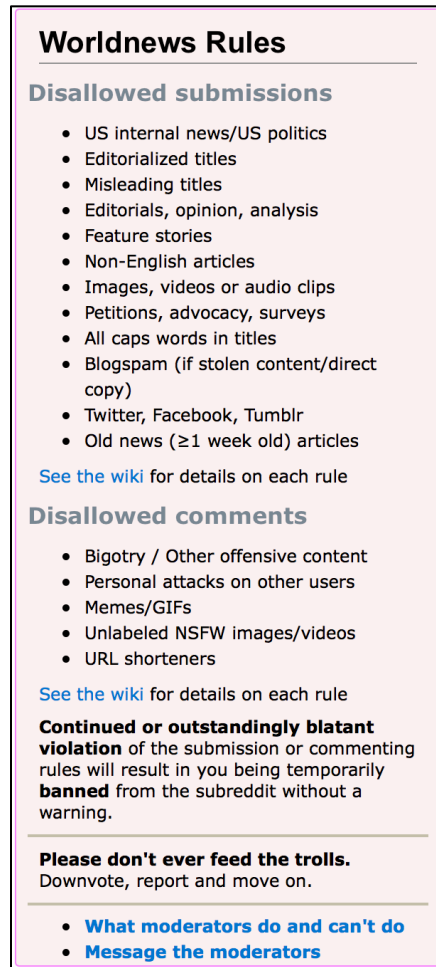


Figure 3: Screen shot of the r/worldnews community rules

As shown by Figure 3, r/worldnews has a strict set of rules for what to post and how to post it thus limiting both the type of content as well as the stylistic expression field. In addition to bigotry, pornography (NSFW= not safe for work, or pornography), memes, gifs, and attacks on others are not permitted. The moderators also give advice for comportment: violating rules on an ongoing basis will result in temporary suspension, and trolls should not be engaged—their posts should be downvoted, and reported. Both reporting and downvoting are easily accomplished since action links appear directly next to the posted content, so peers do not have to search for ways to accomplish these actions.

4chan is a second discursive space discussed by the participants. Like Reddit, 4chan is a discussion board, but unlike Reddit, 4chan is more permissive and open to “vitriol,” however these features are an integral part of the 4chan community and a highly valued by the peers using the platform. The architecture of 4chan is simpler than Reddit—there is no front page, and visitors to the site see the top banner and a list of top topics. Figure 4 is a screen shot of 4chan.com taken on April 17, 2018:

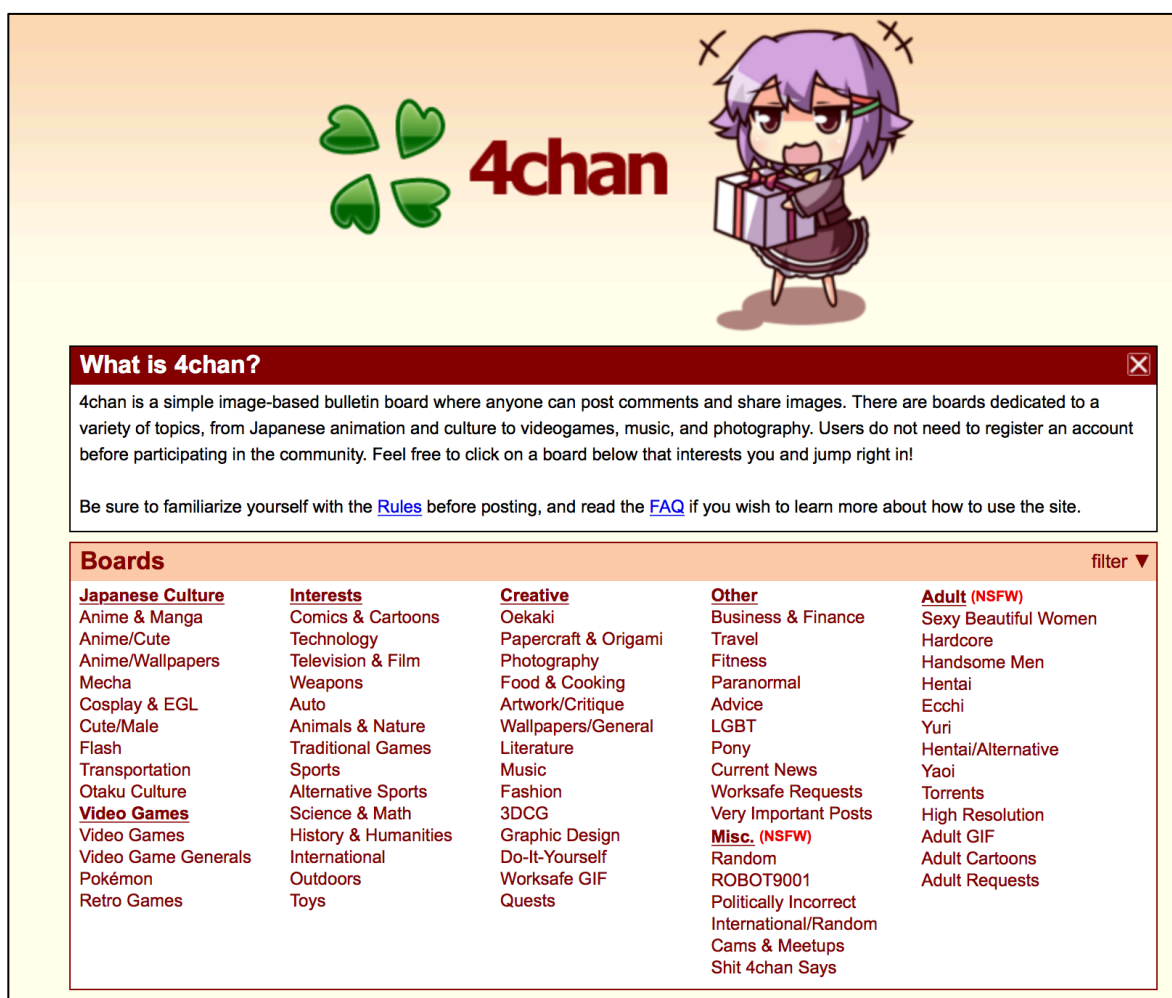


Figure 4: 4chan.com front page

As seen in Figure 4, the top banner of 4chan features a stylized image of a Japanese schoolgirl. The name of the page is a derivative of “Futaba Channel” which is the coding basis the site

creator, Christopher “moot” Poole used. “4chan” is a shortening of #4 Futaba Channel which is still an active site. Other “chans” exist as well, but 4chan is one of the most active and visited sites on the Internet and a focus of the participants of this study. The schoolgirl on the banner is a representation of the play on words represented by the site name. Despite being a derivative of the Futaba Channel, “4 chan” can be broken down into the number for, or the English word “for” and “chan” which means “girl” in Japanese.

As seen in Figure 4, under the image banner, the description of the page appears:

4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. There are boards dedicated to a variety of topics, from Japanese animation and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register an account before participating in the community. Feel free to click on a board below that interests you and jump right in! Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Rules before posting, and read the FAQ if you wish to learn more about how to use the site.

4chan is an “imageboard” meaning that the most stress is placed on the posted images and that the discussions are oriented around the presence of the images. In some discussion threads, no image posting is permitted and only text-based responses are welcomed. In other threads, memes, gifs, and images are a part of the exchanges. Unlike Reddit, 4chan posts appear based on when they were posted with the most recent comments appearing first. 4chan is broken down into six main sections: Japanese Culture, Interests, Creative, Other, Miscellaneous, and Adult.

Also unlike Reddit, 4chan does not require registration, so the idea of membership in itself is different than that of Reddit. 4chan also allows a purely anonymous posting, posting under any name, even if they are taken up, and posting under verified “identity.” My participants did not

discuss posting purely anonymously and did not make distinctions between posting as a verified and non-verified peer on 4chan. 4chan welcomes all people to participate in the discussions. However, before anyone can enter into any topic, the below message box opens up (see Figure 5 for 4chan disclaimer):

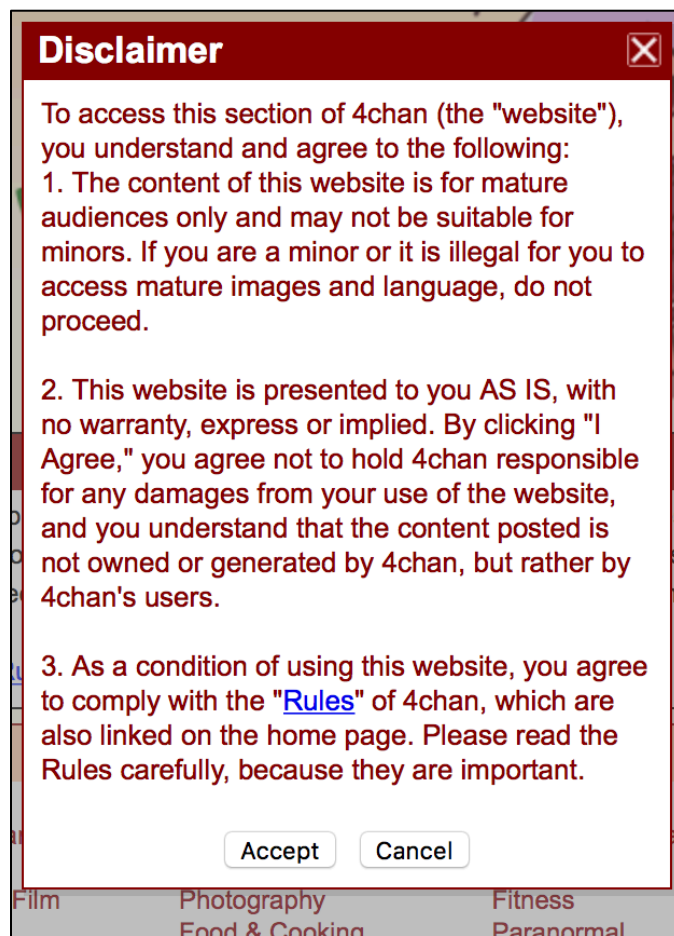


Figure 5: 4chan Disclaimer

The Disclaimer, depicted by Figure 5, intends to warn potential participants about the kind of content they are likely to encounter. In this sense, 4chan is a more “honest” site than Reddit because it makes no claims or promises about the content that the site carries. 4chan is clearly a site for adults, does not welcome children, and does promise any level of care for the peers who chose to read and post.

Once a peer selects to enter into a topic thread on 4chan, they are redirected to a page with the posted discussions. Figure 6 is a screen shot of a 4chan posted discussion:

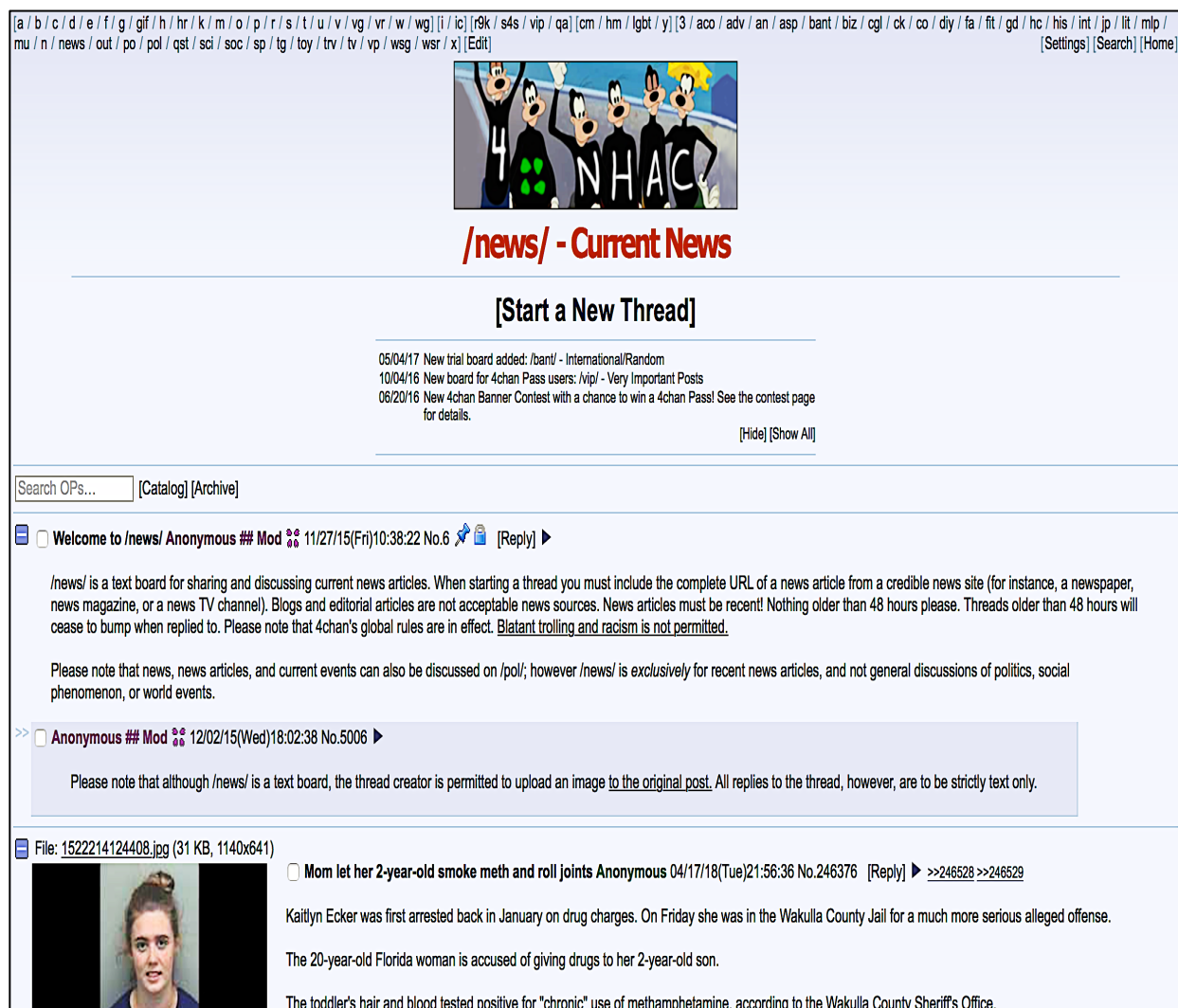


Figure 6: 4chan discussion forum

As shown in Figure 6, 4chan discussions open up one under another with a few comments visible. Peers then have an option to see more replies and comment threads by clicking on the post title. Images, gifs, and memes are permitted in some discussion forums but not others. The /news/ forum does not permit images in the replies, but does allow them in the main post. Figure 6 includes an image in the original post.

Reddit and 4chan are discussion boards. Another genre of discussion spaces that was brought up by the participants was the answerer forum, like Quora. Quora self-describes as “A place to share knowledge and better understand the world.” The site’s mission describes an interest in answering questions and connecting people with information to those who are seeing information. Unlike Reddit and 4chan, anyone who wishes to read or contribute writing must first sign into the site. Figure 7, below, is a screen shot of a long-in page for Quora.com:

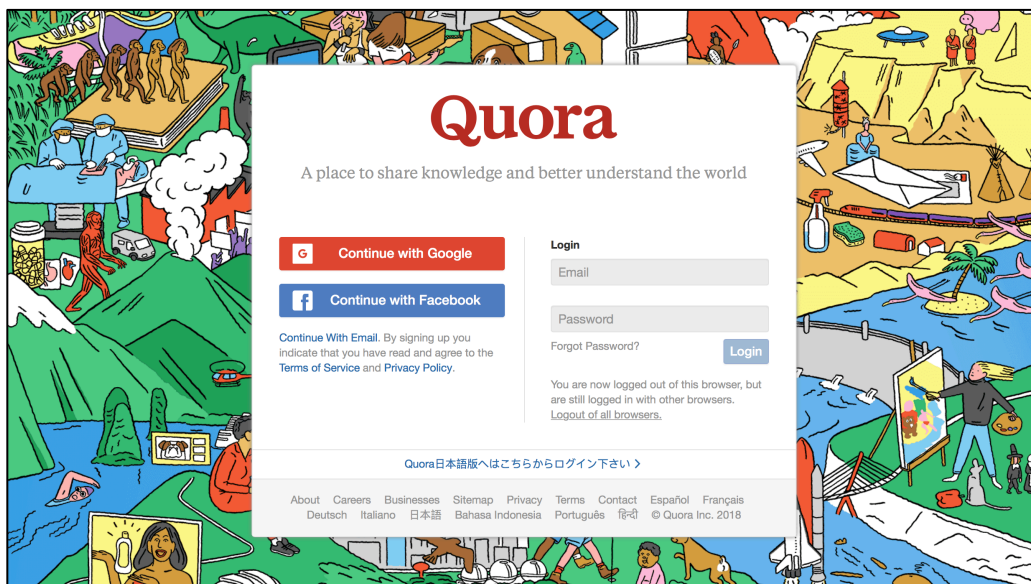


Figure 7: Quora.com front page and log-in options

As seen in Figure 7, peers can sign into Quora by creating a new account, or via Facebook or Google. Peers can use their real name to participate, or can add anonymity when asking a question. Quora is unlike discussion or image boards—anyone wishing to post to Quora can only include open-ended questions that can be accompanied by contextual links. If a post does not meet the standard of open-ended question, it will be removed by the forum moderators.

Once logged in, peers are welcomed into their feed which is filled with latest questions that fall into the perimeters of their interest. Figure 8, below, is a screen shot of an individual feed of a Quora.com peer:

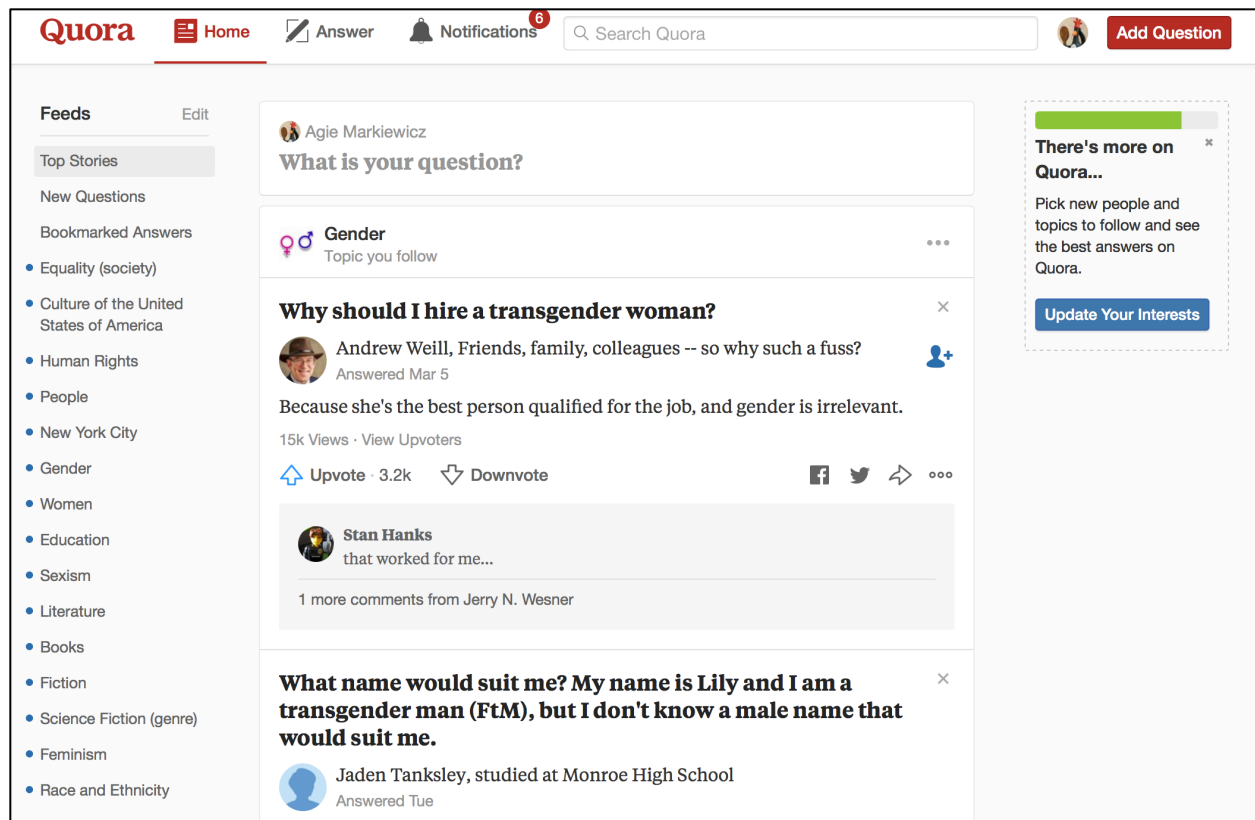


Figure 8: Quora individual feed

As demonstrated by Figure 8, the Quora individual feed features a top banner with the site title, 3 options for actions, a search box, personal settings button, and a large red button to help peers ask questions easily. The 3 options allow peers to select a mode of participation: browse the feed and read/write, go directly to answering questions via the Answer tab, and read the notifications in the Notifications tab. The second level of the feed page features a menu of all interests a peer has pre-selected on the left-hand-side, the latest questions posted to the peer's feed in the middle, and a small menu on the right that invite peers to update their interests list.

Although Quora limits the way peers can initially enter into the conversation via rhetorical mode, there are few restrictions on how peers can answer questions. For instance, peers can use images and text when answering a question. Figure 9, below, demonstrates usage of both text and images:



Figure 9: Usage of text, screen grabs, and memes in Quora discussion

As shown by Figure 9, The discussion stream allows peers to insert images into the body of their answer on Quora.com. In addition, peers who are reading the answers have the ability to upvote or downvote answers, comment either with their user name, full name, or anonymously, as well as post the post across other online spaces such as Twitter.

Another type of discursive space discussed in this work are online reviews. Amazon.com reviews are most widely discussed by participants and the site provide a wide range of ways to review: even without making a purchase, peers can write a review, assign a star rating, and comment on previously composed reviews (see Figure 10 for an example of star-rating a product on Amazon.com).

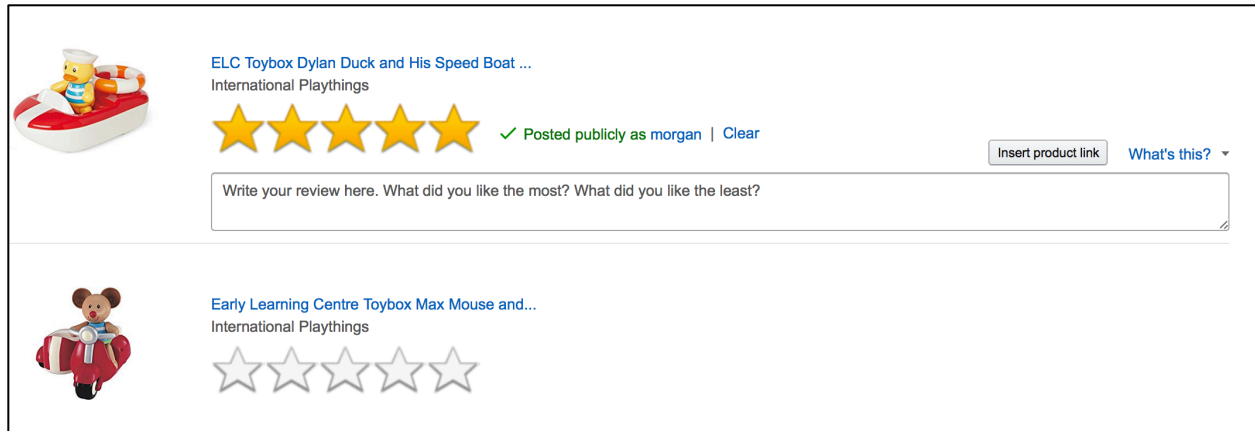


Figure 10: Screen shot of a star review assigning process on Amazon.com

Figure 10 demonstrates the process of assigning a star rating to a product by a verified buyer. The first toy has 5 stars selected and next to the selected stars, now in yellow, is a check mark in green that specifies the public name the review was registered under. Amazon reviewers are able to change the name they use for product reviews by clicking on the current name, which is in blue and typing a new name (see Figure 11):

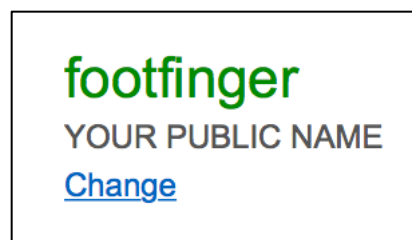


Figure 11: Changing name on profile display on Amazon.com

Figure 11 shows the process of changing the publicly visible peer-name. However, changing a name is only possible for non-student level reviewers on Amazon.

To begin composing a review, a reviewer first has to assign the star rating. Once stars are assigned, a text box appears where reviewers can insert an unspecified amount of text as well as images and links to up to 10 other Amazon reviews. Once a review is posted, several options appear for potential shoppers (see Figure 12 for an example of Amazon.com product review):

Top customer reviews

 Blue Leaves

★★★★★ This bucket is great for a range of things

March 4, 2018

Size: 1-(Pack) | **Verified Purchase**

This bucket is great for a range of things. We have 2 of them, one is used upstairs, to hold and cart around cleaning supplies. The other we keep alternatively in our main floor kitchen, or basement utility room. This one is used to haul things from one floor to another—for instance, tools, toys, and mostly smaller supplies. It's also a good mopping bucket.

The rectangular shape works great for a lot of items. For instance after the holidays we used it to bring up pieces of the Christmas village that were on our fireplace mantle, so we could pack them up. It accommodated 2 standard size houses, and trees/accessories easily.

It is very sturdy, and cleans up easily.

[Comment](#) | One person found this helpful. Was this review helpful to you? [Report abuse](#)

Figure 12: Amazon.com review

As seen in Figure 12, an Amazon review begins with the icon and name of a reviewer who submitted the writing. Underneath the name is the star rating and the title of the review in bold. Under the star rating is the date the review was submitted, then the size of the product, and a designation of whether or not the reviewer purchased the item. Then comes the text of the review, which can be formatted as the writer sees fit. Underneath the text of the review is an option to post a comment about the review, to designate the review as either helpful or not, and finally to report abuse.

Reviewers feel compelled to comment on reviews they disagree with. Even for a product like a bucket, reviewers will argue with one another about the content of the review in semi-visible ways. Why semi visible? Because the comments are not immediately available, and have to be opened up by clicking on the “Comments” link (see Figure 13).

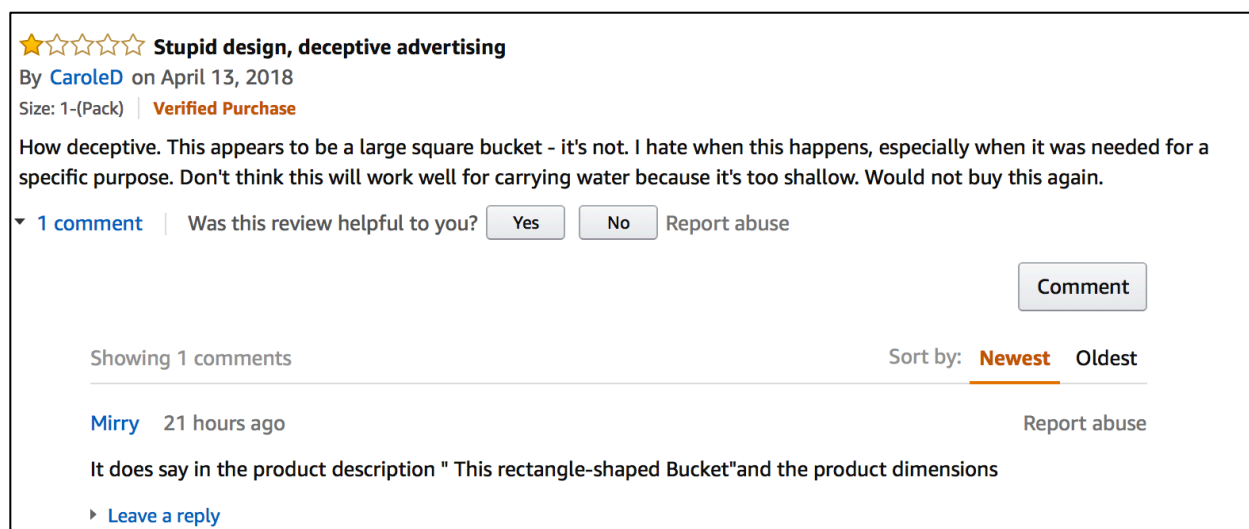


Figure 13: Review and comments section opened up on Amazon.com

Figure 13 shows the same review structure as Figure 12, but the comments section is opened up to reveal the one comment that was left for Carole D. Even in the comments section, Amazon readers can report abuse and leave replies.

Online Genres

Survey participants described the genre of writing online in straightforward terms and gave simple directions for how to be a successful writer of online posts and reviews. As two participants said, “don't write too long of reviews so people read it...if they are too long they get overlooked - no matter how good or bad the review is” and “Knowing the audience of wherever you are posting, the length of the review/comment, website rules/guidelines, and establishing your credibility if needed.” These two responses encapsulate 37 responses that favored short posts. Here, the observations have a great deal to do with the over-all readability preferences in

online spaces—short and to the point writing tends to dominate the web (Kress, 2003; Yancey, 2011; Davies, 2008). This is evidenced by the existence of platforms like Twitter, which allow peers to post only 280 characters per post. Naturally, not all of writing done for the web relies on brevity—there are multiple magazines and groups dedicated to long-form writing. Online discussions and reviews, it seems, fall into the short category of writing, and the participants seem to know this based on their experience of both reading and writing them.

Online discussion forums, such as Reddit or 4chan, were discussed by John and Ian specifically. These AODS were described as multifaceted and complex spaces that have the potential to educate as much as they could frustrate. Ian, who was a nontraditional student, forums became a means of learning a broad range of literacies—from cooking to computer programming, forums were spaces that brought together peers with knowledge and those who desired to learn it. But AODS were not idealistic spaces where anyone could waltz in and be fed information without encountering hitches at some point. As Ian and John pointed out, there were no fact checkers online, and the tone of discussions was often unchecked. As John noted:

Forums—a lot of people bitching about the things they don't know about. Like America, as we do, it would just be discussions of anything (...) A lot of complaining, stupidity, people thinking they're right, and they're not (...) Everyone wants to feel like they are important, like they're smart and they're right. SO when you get to these sites it's that ability to just put it out there and you're not gonna be interrupted usually. So if you're in a big group chat, they might get onto a new topic before you finish typing what you're talking about, but if you're on a forum you can type out whatever you want and it's gonna show up there at some point.

Though John's initial description of online forums here might seem negative, I saw it as an honest assessment from a realist. John, in other words, was not idealistic about the potential of forums, or who might frequent them. Instead, John showed that all online forums were reflections of the social groups that frequented them (Marshall, 2007; Franklin, 2005; Landow, 2006; Nakamura, 2008), and he equated the forums to America, because America was also messy.

But there was also a great deal of compassion in John's description of forums—it is true that everyone wanted to feel valuable, and I believed that John captured the essence of why online forums allowed people to experience the feeling of relevance: the ability to draft a thought without being interrupted (Marshall, 2007; Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). As John noted, other modalities, even the ones available online, provided a more dynamic environment, but at the price of ideas and thoughts being cut off and voices being stifled. In chats or even on social media, points and ideas could get lost in the fast-paced exchanges taking place (Marshall, 2007; Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). But in online discussion forums, the space to post a comment was not interrupted, so anyone writing could compose their thoughts without another person interrupting, cutting off, or overshadowing them (Davies, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Jenkins, 2008, 2009).

Surprisingly, reviews emerged as a major focus for both survey participants and interview participants. Seemingly, all participants not only read reviews, but wrote them on a consistent basis. Although it needs to be noted that review platforms vary, and that participant engagement with writing reviews differed, it is significant that nearly all participants showed a great interest in reviews. Looking into participant definitions helped to frame the discussion of reviews: one survey participant described the function of online reviews as writing of “people who own a

certain product [and] share online their personal experience and opinion of the product to show other[s] who are interested in the product what to expect.” This description focuses on the idea of sharing personal experiences with others in order to demonstrate what can be expected. Another participant said that reviews are “Feedback on a product, that is useful to other potential buyers.” The review is thus a genre that allows for sharing opinions with others through a variety of modalities. Platforms such as Amazon, Ali Express, and Yelp support a variety of multimedia and encourage reviewers to include images and even videos in their reviews. Ali Express is a uniquely robust space that customarily includes many languages in the review stems that are frequently peppered with pictures of the products. As Susan pointed out in her interview, for a woman who frequently does not fit the standard sizes, seeing clothing in images is a crucial step in making a purchasing decision.

Although reviews and discussions may not be a single genre of online writing, they both allow peers to engage in multimodal communication. Reviews and discussions can be seen as types of literacy events on the macro scale as well. The practices deployed in the production and consumption of either type of online writing can be observed and classified, taught and theorized about. In fact, the two genres were some of the most modern means of communicating created. More importantly, both reviews and discussions are both interest-driven and useful in their nature. For the participants in this study, both reviews and discussions had a major impact on the development and day-to-day activities.

Proprietary versus non-proprietary spaces

Participants’ descriptions of what online forums and reviews are revealed a deep awareness of the technical communal, and contextual aspects. Comments and reviews were produced by a set of people who might be called community members, and who produce these comments and

reviews in specific contexts of the specific spaces. As one participant said: “Comments are posts made by members of the online community, sometimes anonymously sometimes not, that usually pertain to a certain subject or topic of the page” while another participant pointed out that comments and reviews are “a mixed bag that you should always take with a grain of salt. Depending on what you are reading comments about can greatly effect the type of comments that will be popular.” Both descriptions pointed to the participants’ awareness of the situatedness (Gee, 2001, 2007) of comments: each community created the rules and boundaries for participation, and each community defined what is and is not appropriate and popular. 39 participants expressed similar views. In fact, this was a keen observation that demonstrated both broad-range knowledge of Internet spaces as well as a sensitivity toward understanding texts. The survey participants observed that each online space—be it discussions, reviews, or social media, belonged to something beyond the people participating (Marshall, 2007; Davies, 2008; Coiro et. al., 2014, Jenkins 2008, 2009).

The larger architecture of the Internet relies on associations and stakeholders. What I mean is simple: online spaces that are not corporate are governed by rules set up by either an overseeing body or by the stake-holders of these sites. In these spaces, resistance to hegemonic norms and resistance to corporate interests is most likely to occur (Lievrouw, 2001, 2006; Morrell, 2008; Banks, 2011).

Other spaces are proprietary and the boundaries for participation can, and are, influenced by the parent company as well as advertisers, not to mention community members. Survey participants point to this reality and thus speak against the myth of neutral Internet (McLuhan, 2001). As one participant pointed out:

there are sections of certain forums dedicated specifically to controversial topics so the comments there are very argumentative, combative, and thought out. But there are also sections where things are more open to different opinions so things are more civil,

while another participant pointed out that

online comments have varying degrees of requirements on different forums, and they can have strict guidelines in terms of what they HAVE to include or absolutely cannot include. A lot of times there's no censorship as to what someone can say.

Hence, the survey participants were aware that even in community governed spaces, there was some type of a give and take present, and that dynamic was essential in dictating what was seen as an appropriate contribution to the community.

Global reach

One of the benefits of online spaces is their ability to reach audiences across time and space (Lievrouw, 2001, 2006). This statement may seem hyperbolic, but the survey participants exemplified how online communities permitted peers to access conversations on topics that their social circles may not tolerate. One participant stated that “it’s fun looking through discussions on topics that I like but can’t talk with between friends because they don’t have the same interests.” This participant wrote and read to discover enjoyment (Gee, 2007) and engaged in the process of play (Vygotsky, 1978) as well as participated in a community of discourse (Gee, 2001, 2007; Kress, 2003) and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that they did not have access to in the physical world. Another participant said that “People from all over the world gathered to converse about a topic or feelings on a product.” These sentiments were echoed by 33 participants who described AODS as inherently communal and discursive in nature—something

that many scholars have remarked on before (Alvermann, 2008; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Marshall, 2007; Yancey, 2011; Davies, 2008, Jenkins 2008, 2009). However, it was significant to note that the participants chose to dwell on the point of connectivity and community. One participant remarked that online discussions and reviews were “a form of open communication between people who might not have otherwise been able to share ideas.” Here, communication and idea sharing were underpinned by an enabling effect of online spaces (Lievrow, 2001). Multiple persons from around the world (Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005; Morrell, 2008; Landow, 2006) can access these spaces, and more significantly, share ideas (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2008, Jenkins 2008, 2009). Whether located in the “first world” or in a world that is somewhat oppressed, individuals can gain access to these spaces for free and connect in meaningful ways. Spaces like Reddit and Quora emerged as specifically conducive to building such connections since the open nature of the forums saw to create communities based on interest. Quora and other answer forums exist to enable question answering, and do not include a time-limit for answering or reading of answers. Anyone with access, no matter how intermittent, could see answers and comments and engage in discussion as they saw fit. Quora, and spaces like it, emerged as spaces that could help peers build connections and resist oppressive forces regardless of what those forces might be. Participants of this study expressed a sense of awe and gratitude that showed how crucial online discussions have become to the participants’ social development: no matter how sporadic or time-lapsed participation was, it was playful and powerful (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann 2008; Gee, 2007; Vasudevan, 2006; Jenkins 2008, 2009).

Discourse communities

Each online space, regardless of its architecture, inevitably changed overtime. Both in terms of participation standards and the tools available, online spaces frequently develop new protocols

for participation, new jargons, and new modes of engagement. The readers and writers of online posts and reviews constitute a community that shaped ways of communicating over time (Street, 2003; New London Group, 1996). The contents of online posts became a discourse (Kress, 2003) that was often unique to the space the writing appeared in (Marshall, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Jenkins 2008, 2009). The most powerful ideas here reflect the need to build consensus over several posts as well as discussing communal spaces where writers and readers could come together to share/express and share/read. In essence, online posts emerged as an electronic contact zone (Selfe & Selfe, 2011) that had the potential to build hybridity (Loomba, 1998) between reader and writer. However, these issues potentially remained invisible to peers who did not engage in any sort of reflection about their participation. By participating in this study, participants were asked to reflect and were thus encouraged to begin building a process of praxis (Freire, 1996). Though I did not intend directly to engage Freire's pedagogy, I did implicitly when I asked participants to discuss their participation, name the practices they engaged in, and assign value to their participations. What became apparent to me through the course of writing this dissertation is that peers need to engage in praxis not only as learners, but also in the process of altering the online spaces they were a part of. Anything from architectures to jargon change over-time, but the changes will not be meaningful, or even helpful, if the peers do not reflect closely on what practices work and why. Here, praxis emerged as a mode of building online spaces in a communal way, and as a way to learn about the functions and trends of online spaces. Further, peers have the ability to gain conscientização—or the process of building critical consciousness. Peers engaging in online spaces will be able to understand the contradictions and incongruities that exist in social settings beyond the online setting.

In many online communities, the emergence of discourse includes understanding and using multimedia components in the composition process. However, the mere presence of the multimedia was not remarkable in itself. What was remarkable was the participant view that multimedia components necessarily be accompanied by text thus creating a hybrid means of composing. John and Susan both pointed to the necessity of explaining multimedia components to avoid confusion when reading. Here is a parallel with what many students are taught about academic writing—nothing can stand on its own and needs the writer’s interpretation. Perhaps this is not a surprising parallel since both John and Susan were not only traditional college students but also had extensive composition training through specialized courses and programs they were enrolled in.

Further, as Oliver showed, the usage of visuals is usually connected to a wider community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that frequented specific online spaces. Here, the participant gave the example of tumblr—a platform filled with gifs, images, and memes¹. Over time (Alvermann 2008; Marshall 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009), tumblr developed to look and read a certain way, and all peers who use tumblr become aware of the language and multimedia that may be used, what the specific multimedia means at the given moment, and what it is meant to work as. Although many of the tumblr images and multimedia were not exclusive to tumblr and exist on other platforms, many images and memes are exclusive to tumblr and may be confusing

¹ Memes have a long tradition and have been first theorized by Richard Dawkins in his 1967 book *The Selfish Gene* where he describes the replication of units of genetics in the process of evolution, and discusses the need for a vehicle for the transition to occur. Dawkins observes that human culture and behaviors act as vehicles for memetic repetitions that will ultimately drive the development of culture. In this theory, human act as replicators who copy memes imperfectly and over-time carry memes forward replicating them and changing them through addition of new points, refinement, combination with other memes, and inventing new ones. Dawkins can be credited for inventing the term “meme” but the theories of cultural as well as systemic and biological replications have been discussed as far back as Darwin’s original theory of evolution. Today, and in the context of this study, memes are images that have been accepted by a given community as meaningful, and becomes augmented with each peer’s own words. For instance, the “Confession Bear” meme includes a specific image of a bear with text above and text below. Each peer who wishes to participate in a certain type of posting, or literacy event, creates their own confession and posts it to the platform as a conversation starter.

to non-peers. Tumblr peers recontextualize content from other platforms and sources (Barton & Hamilton, 2005) producing multimodal play (Vasudevan, 2006) that may be difficult to understand (Hall, 2012) by discourse (Kress, 2003) outsiders (Vasudevan, 2006).

In the same vein, writing and address forms can be unique to some online platforms—the participant gave an example of YouTube which had a specific culture that was seen as toxic by other communities. The point here is larger than merely audience expectations or reader responses—these ideas were raised by peers familiar with the dilemma of choosing words and multi-media to fit their purpose. Clearly, it might be easy for a peer of a certain platform to follow the rules and norms of a familiar space. But peers of several spaces, Internet aficionados per se, who float around among many platforms can and will run into issues of cross-platform confusion as well as noobs who are unfamiliar with the rhetoric of the Internet or even of select spaces, an audience splintering Hall (2012) points to. Here we see the “state of active interplay” (McLuhan, 2001, p.63) which may cause frictions for the many emerging “tribes” (McLuhan, 2001) or communities (Marshall, 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009). So as much as non-textual components can be useful and fun, participants were deeply aware of the need to place them in a specific rhetorical footing where they will not be lost or misunderstood.

Community rules and regulations

The usage of multimedia or jargon were not specific rules that any online space featured. However, many participants noted that most of the spaces they frequented included some sort of rules including behavioral and discursive perimeters. One participant pointed out that “Some websites require a level of respect between commenters and some websites are a free-for-all” noting the community rules and regulations that exist. Ian pointed out that platforms like 4chan were “notoriously unmoderated and unstructured” while spaces like Reddit were described as

having specific community rules that apply to each discussion forum. Platforms like 4chan frequently turned into all out brawls that were acceptable to the members of those communities and even if moderated, a wide range of behaviors was accepted. Tom described this phenomenon as “freedom of speech in its purest form” albeit then saying that peers often took advantage of this freedom to engage in rather vile debates. The issues with freedom of speech and hate speech were interestingly represented in these description. Clearly, what was acceptable in one discourse community was completely out of the question in another community.

As with the meaning of multimedia, the meaning of rudeness, and unacceptable behavior emerged as a contentious matter. Despite trying, neither survey participants nor interview participants were able to define what the actual scope of acceptable behavior online was. There was a practical reason for that: internet spaces were too numerous and too broadly defined for any one etiquette to suffice for each and every space. What was acceptable in one space was seen as rude or hateful in another space. For example, most discussions on 4chan are far harsher and more rude than what could be encountered in reviews on Amazon. There simply is not one unified discourse on the internet as values and goals of each community vary starkly.

Despite being a discursively and culturally fractured, some participants saw the Internet as a monolith that should be unified by one etiquette. A survey participant suggested that “There should be a common language or etiquette. I would approach it as professionally as possible.” Here, the participant is concerned not only with the visual formatting, but also with the tone and stylistic contexts that ought to be present in online writing. The call for common etiquette, was a desire to curb the bullying and trolling that took place in online spaces, but results in a call to unify all participation under the flag of “business” English (Darder & Uriarte, 2013; Bourdieu, 1991; Selfe & Selfe, 2011). This call, although rooted in good intentions of preserving

politeness, was also a call to erase all manners of local difference, steamroll over linguistic differences, and white-wash any local languages. In essence, the participants is not realizing that their call is a colonial answer to globalize and Anglicize online speech to fit the mold of Western business worlds. Without careful deconstruction of views like this participants', the Internet is in some danger of being claimed and sterilized to meet the preferences of educated Westerners.

Online spaces were described by participants as multifaceted and ever changing. The key findings of this section showed that technology as much as the people using it shape the ways in which online exchanges take place. The participants showed that there are many issues to consider when composing online—from the platform to the multimedia components at hand, peers had to engage with a wide range of literacies each time they read or wrote online. Many of the experiences described showed how unstable the discourse communities were, and how dynamic the discourses produced were. Between the communal standards and multimedia tools, discourse communities produced unique cultures that had various cultural productions and artifacts. But despite the variances and celebrations of fracturing, the participants of this study fell short of promoting full and meaningful liberations. The participants had good intentions in that they called for the creation of safer online spaces, but in that process they were unable to see how they were simultaneously calling for an Internet that was suited uniquely to them—what would happen to the spaces that were not produced by English speakers? What would happen to non-native English speakers in spaces that insisted on a certain type of English usage? These questions remained unanswered by the participants and emerged as potent fuel for consideration of pedagogies and basis to praxis formation.

Peer Cultures

Previously, I discussed the emergence of discourse communities in AODS. Coupled with technological and discursive limitations, AODS became sites of cultural formation and production where peers experienced online writings of other peers. Based on those experiences, both survey and interview participants discussed what they observed about emerging online cultures and what they believed were important lessons to keep in mind when considering writing in online spaces. This section develops participant ideas surrounding etiquette, anonymity, and aggression in AODS. To being dissecting what peers saw as appropriate online behavior, the section works backwards starting from an examination of online identities peers develop online. The section then moves to discuss the negative aspects of online discourses and culminates in examining the preferred online discourse participants described.

Anonymity and limitations

One of the earliest criticisms of online environments was the complaint about anonymity and the role it played in spreading misinformation as well as malice. The 1993 *The New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner (in Fleishman, 2000) was an early alarmist bell against online environment.



Figure 14: The New Yorker cartoon “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” by Peter Steiner (in Fleishman, 2000)

The text under the image of two dogs at the computer reads: “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” The cartoon highlighted the issues with online anonymity and the permissiveness of the digital environment as they were understood by the early Internet peers. But most of the participants of this study were not even born in 1993, so it became important to examine how the Millennial generation saw the issues of anonymity in their online participation. Online anonymity has been widely written about and often judged harshly. Often, the anonymity that Internet spaces provided was described as a way to unleash abominable behavior, and somehow a reason for why peers acted badly. But the interview participants showed that online anonymity

is not as straight forward or black and white as previously stereotyped. In part, the issue of pure anonymity was not a familiar phenomenon to my participants who did not discuss it. The participants in this study engaged in semi-anonymous discussion where a screen name stood in place of a peer's full name. In a sense, the anonymity my participants described revealed that most of the spaces in the online world do not feature purely anonymous post possibilities. In essence, pure anonymity permits peers to unleash without any observance of decorum or concern for cultivating any good will with the rest of the community. Pure anonymity is what the early critics spoke out against, and seems like an area that needs to be contrasted against limited anonymity on online spaces.

In fact, the very nature of anonymity was questioned by participants, and a concept of creating online personas (Poster, 2013; Gee, 2007) was discussed widely. In addition, the concept of masquerading was developed based on participant analysis of online anonymity to showcase the effects of splintering personalities (Poster, 2013) on modern environments. I propose that masquerading is a strategy of revealing truth—and a discourse that was used as an excuse to propagate violence or lead to personal liberation. Mostly, anonymity was a deeply ethical issue that the participants understood and valued in a variety of ways.

Robert saw anonymity as something that was inherently present in online spaces, and a phenomenon that attaches itself to all peers as soon as they enter online spaces. For him, anonymity was not necessarily the lack of identifying factors, but rather an attitude that a peer developed in order to distance themselves from the presence of actual people in the audience:

there is no face to face interaction so you lose personhood (...) you say things that you would never say to a person's face. The friends that I have that I interact with online, especially the more conservative ones, will say things that I know they would

never say to my face and then it becomes a question of you need to calm the fuck down and think about what's happening right now cuz you're being a jerk. Even with people you now there is this air of anonymity on the Internet I think.

Robert pointed out a fascinating issue: even people he knew could become anonymous to us once they enter an online space (Landow, 2006; Ito, 2013). The online environment was used as an excuse by people who were more than willing to enter into destructive discourse (Gee, 2001; Kress, 2003; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Alvermann, 2010; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b) and become bullies.

Trolling of strangers may seem like an easy proposition. After all, we do not know who these people are, we have never met them, and we cannot even put a face to their online name. But trolling of people we know in online spaces is a bizarre and disturbing reality that Robert addressed. The online environment, then, served as a means of explaining why some people allowed themselves to step into volatility and start to troll their friends, loved ones, not to mention strangers (Turkle, 2017). In essence, AODS become a litmus test that could reveal a hidden self of any person: some of the hidden parts of people become visible in online discussions. If there was a sharp shift in the discourse (Gee, 2001, Kress, 2003; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006;) face to face versus online, then a person has revealed an inner self to us—a person that is more honest, and sadly, more vile.

Ian expanded this point even further by noting that the world is full of people who feel censored in day-to-day interactions, but who feel that the online space is a free for all, and open to violence:

there're a lot of people that are very violent -- just violent people and it's not societally acceptable to be to be a violent person and you can get online and you can

be as violent as you want you can talk about raping people if you walk into a room and you talk about raping people somebody's not gonna like that.

While Robert talked about brutality of posters, Ian brought up a dual approach to looking at online writing. On the one hand, anonymity may be spurring “vile” behavior (Poster, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b), but that also might be seen as honest. After all, online writers do not have to face anyone and are free to express even their most awful thoughts in a low-consequence environment. Rules of polite society do not apply so much online and both Ian and Robert suggested that vile online behavior had nothing to do with anonymity. Both described instances where removing the immediate presence of a human rendered the online writer numb to treating people online as people—even if they were using their real names and had longstanding personal relationships with the target of their vitriol. Robert and Ian’s analysis presented a world where human operators ceased to feel their own humanity or recognized the humanity of others as soon as they found themselves in front of a screen and not a person (Loomba, 1998; Franklin, 2005; Landow, 2006; Selfe & Selfe, 2011). Here, we see that the bully, or troll, masquerade is actually happening in the physical world, and the truth of a person is revealed online.

But anonymity also allowed peers to experiment with their identity (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2010; Landow, 2006; Gee, 2007; Poster, 2013; Jenkins, 2008, 2009) and to explore possibilities for their daily lives. John points out that there are specific spaces where he went to tap into traits and emotions usually left dormant:

[Online participation] it’s the anonymity but it’s also a different identity so it’s that I don’t know who’s saying it—I know j_biggy68 so it’s a mask almost, it’s a different person. So it does feel like, depending on the site like oh I have a slightly

different persona here I can play a different character here with certain qualities that are not necessarily what you do in person it's what you want it to be.

John, like Ian, discussed the phenomenon of constructing a context-specific persona online. It seemed that many peers crafted various personas for their online participation. Each persona was used in a specific forum, and was designed to help the peer achieve a specific rhetorical function. The splintered selves that emerge as means of hybrid and borderland communication were essential tools to navigating the online spaces and achieving personal emancipation, or even stress relief (Poster, 2013; Landow, 2006; Anzaldua, 1987; Gee, 2007).

For John, creation of personas was a function of appealing to audiences. These personas functioned like masks, but as opposed to the destructive masquerading, masks were a means of highlighting specific interests and personal traits in specific contexts. Shifting between personas allowed peers to filter and concentrate the essence of a specific pursuit (Poster, 2013; Alvermann, 2010; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). In addition, each persona was designed to assist John in the processing emotions or knowledge. On some days, he tapped into the personas that allowed him to “let off steam” by unleashing pent up emotional stress. On other days, he engaged in posting that relied on argument construction, inclusion of sources, and argumentation.

Anonymity emerged as a way to protect peers in certain situations (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2010; Landow, 2006; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Jenkins, 2008, 2009)—especially in the world of online reviews. Rose pointed out that Amazon did not allow student account holders to review anonymously, and showed that this lack of anonymity prevented her from producing negative reviews:

If I was anonymous I think I would do more reviews, especially when they are helpful. I read this study that people trust peer reviews more than they trust traditional advertising so I think it's actually really helpful. And I do read reviews more than anything—I go to Amazon to see what people think about things. I would do more reviews if it wasn't under my own name.

Here, Rose described the public space that student reviewers must navigate on Amazon. Because she would have to do so under her full name, Rose was not willing to produce reviews on Amazon. The problem of such high visibility was the potential danger of future employers or graduate schools being able to access Rose's public writing and connect it to her, judge her by it, and make decisions about her future based on it. Rose feared being type-cast as a negative person—after all, a single negative review could be misconstrued as the sum-total of her posting online. Rose was self-censoring and not allowing herself to produce writing that she could be proud of. She felt silenced and exposed in this public space and chose not to enter it at all.

There was another issue at play here: Amazon is making student account holders exposed and vulnerable while allowing full-price paying customers to use pseudonyms to produce reviews. In essence, student reviewers were being held hostage by Amazon who preferred not to allow them to have a pseudonym. In essence, the student account holders paid a price for their Prime discount: they could enter the ongoing review conversation and had to remain on the sidelines looking in if they wished to protect themselves. The issues of power and liberation are at stark display here as cultural production was curbed and praxis denied to the subaltern group of student account holders (Fraire, 1996; Bourdieu, 1991). In a real sense, Amazon was making all student account holders the silent consumers (Fanon, 1994; Marx & Engels, 1973) who were not

able to enjoy the same kinds of privileges as other consumers (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011).

The mask of anonymity also held obvious advantages to peers who were living in restrictive environments where aspects of their identity had to be hidden (Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011). Daniel, who identified as a shy person, felt the need to hide his online participation:

It is very easy to hide. When I was younger I was very secluded and in anonymity. SO for a long time my e-mail was “I’m mister unknown” so I would never write my name down. So now I am trying to be more out there—this is my face this is what you get you either like it or if you don’t, sorry.

Like Michael, Daniel discussed his early experiences with anonymity on the Internet as a means of boosting his confidence in the process of practicing his language skills (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Kress, 2003; Buckingham, 2003; Coiro et. al., 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005). Daniel and Michael both felt an anxiety connected with their place in the academic and social worlds, and the Internet spaces allowed them to protect themselves while developing crucial skills (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Kress, 2003; Buckingham, 2003; Coiro et. al., 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; The New London Group, 1996).

Even on a forum like Microsoft Excel, peers might be concerned with initial impressions they were making, and wanted to ensure that they “fit in” as early as possible. Sean was concerned with fitting in, so in the act of selecting his username, he added “QWERTY” at the end to indicate a certain “geekyness.” Sean wanted to play up his belongingness in an effort to be more credible, to be as one of the “techy guys,” and to avoid any stigma of looking like a “noob.” The act of choosing a username is a step in building the mask that accompanies each online profile.

The process of selecting a name was at the heart of creating an online persona (Poster, 2013; Ito, 2013; Hall, 2012; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Yancey, 2011). In selecting a username, peers were being asked to present themselves and to “christen” themselves into the new forum and become identified by the new name.

In many forums, such as Reddit, Imgur, and even the Microsoft Excel forum, peer participation is public to the extent that others can see what posts were made using specific usernames, what comments were made, etc. Thus, the peers with usernames are not entirely anonymous—peer writing can be followed and traced. Participants like Daniel, Oliver, and Ian frequently reviewed past posts by peers whom they suspect of trolling, or who’s opinions seemed out of place. Similarly, if Sean hoped to maintain his “geeky” persona, he would have to reflect those values in his posts and participation history. So far, as Sean noted, he has been learning jargon, using it in his posts, and observing other peers in an effort to shape his future posts. He wanted to shake his feelings of “newbiness” and to become a more seasoned peer with a strong reputation, a process that took months and sometimes years.

Like Ian, Oliver, and Robert, Daniel pointed out that online anonymity was limited, and that critical reading skills could be applied to diminish the power of anonymity. These participants review peer posting histories in order to understand them—a process that revealed that a certain level of consistency and personality might be recorded online. Daniel pointed out that trolls were not always awful, and that for some, trolling was not the usual behavior. Here we saw how sophisticated some participants’ understanding of online anonymity and screen names was (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2008, Jenkins, 2008, 2009). Ultimately, screen understanding the limits of anonymity online allowed participants to accomplish a variety of identity building and community investigative tasks. For Ian, screen names became a means of building up an online

presence/persona that was consistent. For Oliver and Ian, screen names offered an opportunity to investigate and understand who the online peers were. For Rose, screen names were a means of amassing points and reputation. She discussed how “building a name” was a process not unlike what happened in any professional setting. In a world where reputation is a key factor of success, is it strange that online environment norms follow suit? For many interview participants like Daniel, and Robert, authentic subjectivity (Loomba, 1998; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008) was a crucial part of participation. They discussed working self-consciously to create online personas that were steeped in their personal values and did not behave contrary to their physical world selves. Accomplishing an “authentic” online persona meant not masquerading or taking an advantage of the digital space towards means countering the values of their physical lives. Anonymity is a limited concept that needs to be thought through in much greater detail. What the participants pointed out was that peers online engaged in a complex process of self-representation (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Ito, 2013). Yet, the very concept of “self” is fraught with pitfalls (Poster, 2013) and demanded that we conceptualize each peer in online space as a complex human being (Anzaldúa, 1987; Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005) with discreet moods that inherently impacted each post they craft.

Online environments force peers to imagine whom they are speaking with— without a face or even a voice, peers are placed in a position of projecting an identity onto a peer. Such projections could have disastrous consequences as peers have less restraints on them in the faceless environment and may feel emboldened and empowered to bully others. As the participants in this study noted it takes reflection and self-awareness for online bullies to acknowledge their behavior, and to alter it. Peers without a space to reflect and challenge their own behaviors have the potential to become even more destructive in online spaces, especially if they are young and

vulnerable to influence. In this sense, online spaces could become breeding grounds for racism, sexism, homophobia, and other types of violence. It is imperative that these issues become a major part of the public and private discussions. Online peers need to be challenged to reflect on their behaviors, to face the type of behavior they produce and promote online, and be given a chance to see some consequences of the negative behavior. To accomplish these goals, educators, parents, and policymakers need to work together to create frameworks for praxis (Freire, 1996), but also for play (Vygotsky, 1978, Vadsudevan, 2006). Imagining the framework itself is a task bigger than this dissertation, but it is a vital goal that needs to be met in order to create a freer and more equitable Internet that is not a colonized or destructive space (Banks, 2011; Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005).

Negative Writing Culture

One of the major stereotypes about the Internet seems to be that it is filled with trolls, negativity, lies, and biased opinions (Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Landow, 2006). To make the discussion flow smoother, I called this set of literacy events as negative, and refer to the broader literacy practice as negative writing culture. I believed that there were many reasons for the existence of the negative writing culture, but as my participants have noted, some of the reasons include:

- removal of face to face interaction
- possibility of anonymous or semi-anonymous interaction
- lack of direct repercussions
- and the “me too” phenomenon.

In the previous section, I tackled the issues of accountability and the destructive habits of writers who use anonymity as a mask. To move the discussion forward, I will now focus on biased and opinion-driven writing as a factor contributing to negative writing culture.

Some peers in the online world take an advantage of the setting in order to produce malice. The participants draw our attention to the possibility of peers intentionally hurting others, lying, or babbling off topic (see Figure 15):

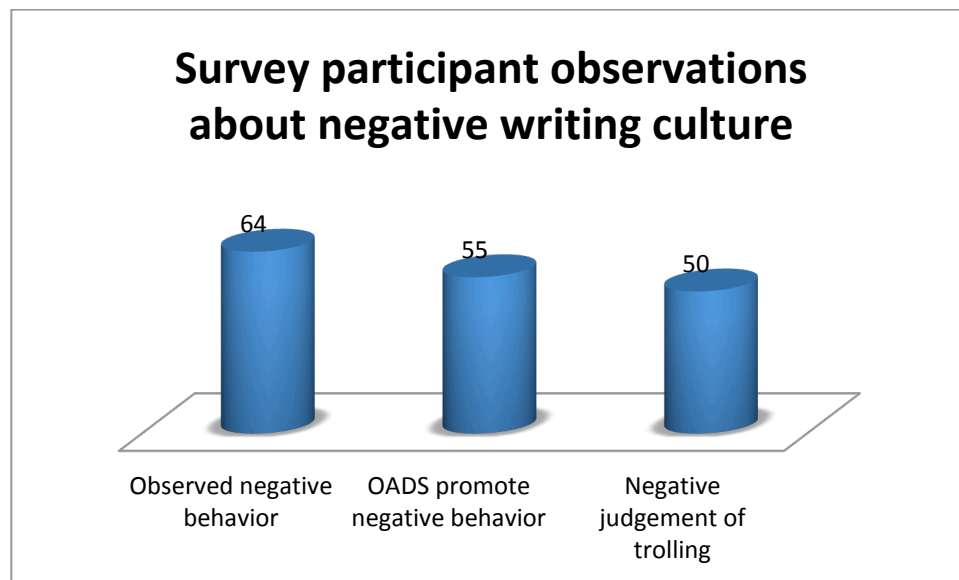


Figure 15: Survey participant observations about negative writing culture

As shown by Figure 15, 64 of participants remarked on their observations of online peer negative behavior. In this instance, the participants said that with the territory of online comments and reviews comes human menace and ineptitude—intentional or otherwise. 55 participants pointed out that the nature of online spaces is somehow permissive or attractive to peers who are not interested in communal rules or in social cohesion. The participants here demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the various purposes peers have for taking part in online discussions and reviews. From the participants’ point of view, some peers joined discussions to further a topic, and others were there to frustrate the conversation and cause mischief. This awareness revealed

that the participants were not a naïve group (Debord, 1998, 2014; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012), but a sophisticated practitioner of online space literacies fully equipped to critically approach any community. Participation in online discussion enabled the participants to experience and learn to decipher varying intents others have for producing writing.

Belonging to any community allows members to develop judgment of others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is no surprise, then, that survey participants expressed multi-layered judgments of other peers: from rhetorical choices to grammatical savvy, survey participants judged not merely the way of participation others espoused, but of the participants as people. In fact, participants were clear when judging a peer's participation and when judging a peer. One participant remarked that “that some [peers] may be 'trolls', or fake to give that business good feedback” indicating that motivation for writing a review or a comment may be either malicious in nature, solicited, or more accurately, that the person writing was themselves malicious in nature. Survey participants both judged negative behavior and some were even shocked to discover it (see Figure 16):

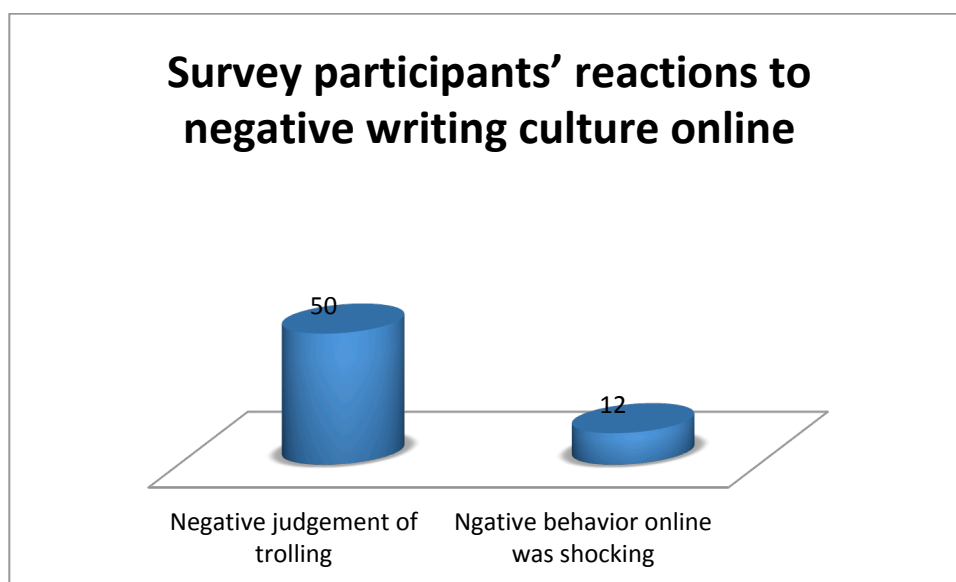


Figure 16: Survey participants' reactions to negative writing culture online

Figure 16 shows that the quoted participant is not alone as 50 participants expressed judgment of other peers, and one participant went as far as to say that “people who try to pick fights with another person in the comment sections are pathetic.” Clearly, this set of participants saw trolling, bullying, or otherwise “rude” behavior as deplorable, and more importantly, participants have no qualms in expressing their disdain for such behavior.

Here, participants moved beyond recognizing a behavior, or even seeing a function of writing, and form a collective opinion about the type of person anyone must be in order to lie, bully, or troll online. Online encounters become electronic contact zones (Selfe & Selfe, 2011) where subjectivities are bound to clash and produce hybridity (Loomba, 1998). The survey participants showed that negative behavior in online spaces matters—it is a tangible, permanent, and public expression of a peer’s character, and they did not excuse this behavior as “online” or somehow less bad because it does not happen face-to-face. In fact, 12 participants discussed discovering this side of a face-to-face acquaintances, and being shocked and disgusted. In essence, the survey participants were more socially savvy due to their online participation and believed that all behavior existed simultaneously—there is no “online” or “real” world bifurcation. In fact, survey participants saw the online world as somehow closer to the truth of the world (Landow, 2006; Poster, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b). Why would that be? Perhaps online environments allowed peers to express themselves more freely, but this freedom meant something different to everyone (Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005).

Both interview and survey participants noted that the potential to express hidden hate was too tempting for many online peers who often created echo chambers of vile ideologies online (Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011). Pre 2016, many of these voices did not have a public visibility and so began to collect in online spaces. Sadly, the voices began to grow in number and volume,

and today in the Trump reality, these voices leaked from the realm of isolated online discussions into mainstream online discussions (Hine et. al., 2016), and the physical world. Reddit, for instance was completely overrun by pro-Trump trolls in the wake of the election. The trolls acted in a semi-organized fashion to snuff out as many liberal voices as they could. Certain sub-Reddits, like r/Politics were virtually contaminated for weeks past the election (Malmgren, 2017). In essence, the space that was created to discuss political events became a breeding ground for hate-speech and outright violence.

A survey participant captured this point even more keenly and addressed the dual positionality of any participant in AODS:

People forget that there is another person on the receiving side of their comments.

The Internet makes them feel like they're free to say what they want and forget that there are people who could read their comments and be hurt by them. Also it is important to keep perception in mind because everyone perceives things differently and what might be funny to you might just seem rude to someone else.

Here the participant remarked on the disembodied space that online writing called forth and demonstrated that online writers were people who “forget” about the reader who might/will encounter their writing (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998). The response points to the postmodern subjectivities in flux and the splintering of the “self” that the postmodern world enables (Poster 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b). The reason why online peers could “forget” about the humanity of others was that they split themselves into many smaller pieces. The self emerged as by no means a single or stable entity, as shown by online environments. Interestingly, the rise of trolls, and the splintered self, show that there was a need and a desire for discourses (Gee, 2001, 2007) that could accommodate a large community (Scribner & Cole,

2001) and ease some tensions rooted in cultural differentials (Bourdieu, 1991; Gramsci, 1988; Banks, 2011; Morrell, 2008). The communities in greatest need of support online are not the peers seeking a polite discourse, but rather the peers who are in a vulnerable cultural and physical position. Some of the most vulnerable peers are children, especially ones who use the Internet without the supervision or advice of adults. Additionally, peers who come from oppressed spaces (be they geographic or cultural) were often faced with violence from peers who were comfortable enough to engage in destructive discourse. As participants in this study noted, the production of destructive discourses comes from a place of ignorance, supremacy, and lack of empathy. Peers need to be engaged in deconstructing their social positionality in order to reveal their privileges and to help them uncover the multiple positionalities that other peers online inhibit. Empathy, most of all, is an online behavior that needs to be actively pursued and taught to help create a meaningful response to the online oppressors who create negative writing cultures online.

Assorted Trolls

I used the term “troll” in the previous section to denote what participants described to me—behaviors and peers who were anything but nice. Both media and academia use the stereotypical representation of online misbehavior. The concept of trolling has been used as a catch-all umbrella term to characterize any online behavior that is confrontational, funny, mean, know-it-allish, or in any way annoying.

But how were trolls born? How could regular-seeming people be turned into bullies, and be mean to others? Interview participants shed some light on the subject by pointing to how some peers reacted to the disembodied online spaces by discussing their own experiences. For

Oliver, anonymity online served as a way to engage in meaningless discourse (Gee, 2001, Kress, 2003; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006;) that was not as valuable or personal as face to face interaction:

I would talk and give my opinion about things. I always knew that because I'm in front of a computer I never gave it much – I never placed much importance on artificial means of communication. Cuz I felt that when people talk on e on one, your ability to read them, to analyze them. You have a one on one relationship—it's the best type of relationship.

Here, we saw a reflection of what Robert discussed earlier—the loss of subjectivity (Banks, 2011; Landow, 2006; Franklin, 2005) happened for some online peers because they did not value the mode of communication. The removal of the direct interaction prevented peers from connecting to their audience on a personal level, and so the loss of humanity and disengagement from the emotional aspect of communication become possible (Banks, 2011, Landow, 2006; Franklin, 2005). In other words, not seeing the people who face the screens as people removed many of the social norms peers might observe in the physical world.

John took this idea a step further to show that online spaces could be used as means of tapping into violent behaviors. In his view, the Internet allowed people to avoid face to face confrontation: “the Internet is anonymous and why talk crap to your face? (...) [anonymity] definitely allows [trolling] and people take advantage of it.” The framing of the anonymous aspect was presented as something peers abused. In light of what Robert and Oliver discussed, this interpretation of the online space showed that trolling and bullying was a mode of behavior that was not acceptable in some spheres of society, but was acceptable online specifically because of the removal of subjectivity (Poster, 2013; Loomba, 1998; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Banks, 2011;).

One of the common characteristics that survey participants pointed out about online writers is that they are “sensitive” or “inflammatory.” Being sensitive is by no means the opposite of being inflammatory as the two stances often followed one another. The sensitive peer can lash out. The second possibility was that the sensitive peer might be hurt and silenced by the trolling encountered. The reaction path cannot be predicted by any means—as with people on the street, online peers might react to similar content in a variety of ways pending on their mental state in the moment.

Survey participants as a group have judged online peers and created a stereotype to warn others: online peers were an unpredictable group, so anyone writing needed to tread lightly (See Figure 17).

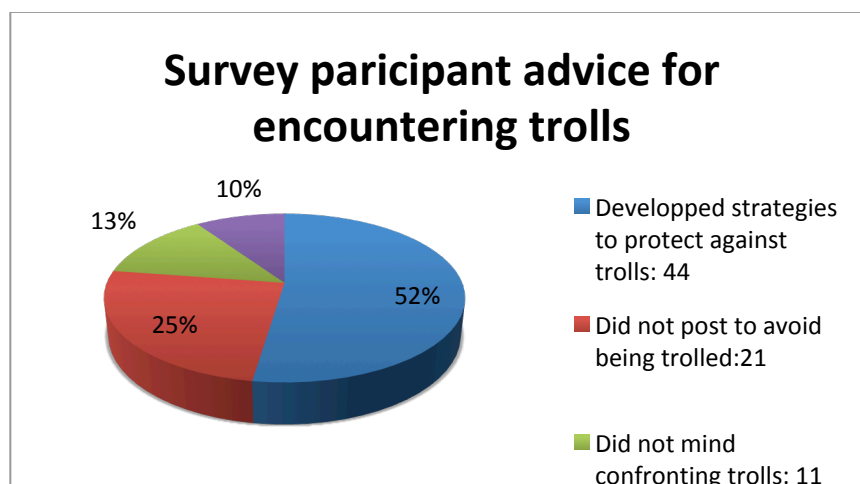


Figure 17: Survey participant advice for encountering trolls

44 participants described ways that they prepared themselves or protected themselves against the bully behavior: for some, not writing online comments was a strategy. 21 participants described not wanting to be targeted and thus treating the presence of trolls in online spaces as a barrier to participation in at least some circumstances. 11 participants described these encounters as a possible confrontation, and seemed to be ready to go against trolls at any given moment.

Whatever the technique or experience with trolls, sadly, survey participants believed that the overall peer body in online spaces met the definition of troll.

Trolls defined. Trolling was not a new or ground-breaking discovery by any stretch of imagination (Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011). Trolling was a well known behavior that was seen as sinister and ubiquitous online. In fact, many people, participants of this study included, believed that trolls make up the majority of peers of various online spaces. But what IS trolling? Out of all of the participants, Ian had the best definition of trolling. He described trolls as

the trolls the people on the Internet that aren't there but to screw with people (...)
they're lying they're fishing for reactions they're just generally making fun of people
(...) trolls are people that intend to do harm for no apparent reason.

The description here showed that there was a menace and an anger that trolls have. They intend to produce traps and bait others into becoming angry and writing angry comments. There may be many reasons for this type of behavior, but Ian pointed out the simplest truth: most reasons for trolling are not immediately, or ever, known to the targets.

Trolling was preceded by bating. Bating is a strategy used by trolls to entrap peers into an argument. Trolls worked to provoke, insult and anger audiences for the sheer pleasure of “getting a rise” as Ian put it. Tom and John both discussed the necessity of spotting bating in any online environment. John described spotting bating as a skill that eventually arose from using the Internet, while Tom said that baiting was a well-known behavior that experienced peers see with ease. Bating and trolling was described as a major reason for disengaging with online spaces. As Susan noted: “there are people who are angry and just looking to rant so that’s usually I try to avoid that because you can read a lot of stuff and it’s just not going to be relevant.” The participants of this study have become aware and adept at recognizing “bating” strategies, as

Tom notes, and many in the participants' peer groups now treat bating as a joke. However, the participants are college-educated adults who had the benefit of learning critical reading both in school and in online spaces. But what about peers who have not (Yancey, 2011; Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2005)? In this way, online spaces produce a potential great disparity thus contributing to misinformation and social fracturing (Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Banks, 2011; Landow, 2006; Loomba, 1998). In fact, spaces like *Breitbart* and r/politics often attracted and retained a crowd of extreme right-wing thinkers who were virtually immune to science, truth, or even facts.

The Jester. Alongside the stereotypical troll, I suggest a new type of online peer derived from survey and interview participants' responses: the jester. Unlike trolls, who aim to be inflammatory and bully others, jesters are conscious disruptors of online spaces through humor. 43 participants pointed out that online writers sometimes approached posting as an opportunity to be funny, to poke fun, and to derail the flow of the ongoing conversation (Marshall, 2007; Lievrouw 2001, 2006; Jenkins 2008, 2009). Jesters are also peers who knowingly produce nonsensical, yet entertaining, online reviews. The presence of jesters is as ubiquitous as trolls, yet the survey participants did not object to their presence or actions in most instances. As one participant wrote, "Some people write reviews intended to educate readers; others write them to make people laugh; still others write reviews that attempt to do both." This participant, as others who remarked on the same phenomenon, seemed to appreciate the humor that appeared in the jesters' writing. However, like trolls, jesters do not produce straight-forward discourse (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2001, 2007) that can be easily digested or understood (Coiro et. al., 2014). In fact, the purpose of jesters' writing was often confusing and challenging, even if their posts and reviews were funny. Like Shakespeare's jesters, online jesters often veiled their wisdom in humor and

weaved in truths between jokes. As the participants noted, jesters were not malicious, so they were over all judged as a positive presence in online forums.

Both Tom and Ian admitted to “light trolling” that fit into the perimeters of the jester. In their understanding, their actions were intended as humor, or poking light fun at others. Tom discussed his experience of lightly trolling Ted Cruz who was running for president at the time.

Twitter is fun. People take social media so goddamned seriously it’s amazing. Nothing makes me happier—I got banned by Ted Cruz—and it was amazing because it means that this guy had to look at my Twitter handle, probably not he himself, type it into the Banned thing, read it as he typed it, and go ‘no—banned.’ (...) A whole bunch of people like[d] it and it made me so happy.

For Tom, being banned by Ted Cruz on Twitter was a badge of accomplishment because he believed that Cruz, or someone from the campaign, had at least read the tweet, and gone through the process of banning Tom’s account. This was a case of speaking back to power (Bourdieu, 1991; Fanon, 1994; Gramsci, 1988) in a direct way. Tom may not have had the ability to personally interact with Ted Cruz, but through online interaction, he was able to voice his opposition and disgust with the candidate.

Similarly, Ian took great pride whenever he was temporarily or permanently banned from community discussions for “trolling.” He too describes his trolling as light and intended to be funny, but the communities he interacted with had strict rules and were not tolerant of even light trolling. In addition, Ian safeguards against being a full-fledged troll by trolling only “long-time acquaintances” with whom he developed a rapport. Ian’s jestering showed that understanding of boundaries of trolling is may be impossible, and developing a complex image of online behaviors may take much more time and theorizing. In either case, the polivocal online reality

does not include a single voice part called “troll”—sometimes the tune of laughter can be seen as off and ruining the melody of a space. Other times, the same tone rings as a true and clear solo in a choral arrangement.

The Jackleg. The final stereotype that the survey participant pointed out is that of self-styled expert—I called this group the jackleg. This stereotype covers all people who believed they are professionals because they were given access to an audience, and a platform that welcomes all writers. Specifically, one participant says that “People who feel their opinion matters so much that they feel in their mind that they are a professional in that field. For example, Yelp, now people feel they are food critiques” [sic] and another participant pointed out that online participation “grants a sense of authority” to any writer. In these answers, we see that there is a certain level of disdain for the jackleg, and a recognition that the jackleg over-values their writing and opinion. The jackleg, then, has no humility, and no ability to self-reflect. Further, the jackleg emerged as the opposite of a writer who shared an honest and open view. The jackleg was the kind of writer who saw their opinion as absolute and completely right. The participants were also clear that there was a distinction between these two positions, and were critical of the jackleg while being accepting of honest and ethical writers. The jackleg, then, is incapable of hybridity (Loomba, 1998) or of praxis (Freire, 1996) as there was no attempt to engage in discursive exchanges or reflection.

A favorite writing strategy of the jackleg is yammering, or in Sami’s words, “writing to write.” As Sami said: “a lot of people have a lot of free time (...) So for example, (...) a lot of people go online and just post random things that don’t really have a basis behind it. They’re just writing because they want attention or want people to feed into their ego.” Indeed, this type of

participation was frequently observed in many spaces and was positioned as either an opportunity to learn or as an opportunity for ignorance.

Evading Trollification. Younger peers may be particularly vulnerable to writers who only want to feed their ego or to troll others (Ito, 2013). Further, beginner peers might themselves become trolls without learning tools to control their emotional responses. Michael's experience as a young and uncertain peer spoke to this point greatly. As he described, being driven by a desire to prove himself often led to angry outbursts on forums. But many online peers were far more sinister, and simply enjoyed hurting others.

To avoid acting like a troll or jackleg, Robert discussed the need to reference and source, especially in the presidential election season (Morrell, 2008; Buckingham, 2003; Selfe & Selfe, 2011):

when you post things about the economy or the electoral college or the shitty election process in this country (..) or economic issues. People are like 'well have you seen this video from Prager University (...) or Fox News.

Robert pointed out that there are two distinct groups of online writers: people who want to be right, and people who wanted to engage in discussion (Loomba, 1998; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Morrell, 2008; Franklin, 2005; Landow, 2006; Hall, 2012; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). The first group, the jacklegs of the bunch, had a thesis that they are desperate, stubborn, and definitely going to defend—no matter what. These folks were not interested in any other information or point of view. Their mission was to convince, convert, and defend their truth. The second group, non-jacklegs, was interested in understanding other points of view, wanted to understand the basis for opinions, and wanted to engage with others. Hence, online writers had to make

decisions about the intent of their writing and match their tone and style to the intent—not the other way around (Buckingham, 2003; Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

As a long-time online writer, and past moderator, Robert was able to articulate the differences in the two positions. He was also able to spot either quickly, though that was not the case when he was just beginning to read online. Initially, Robert believed that all online peers were there to “discuss, understand, share, and support one another.” Robert felt compelled to bring all peers into a dialogue, and wanted to reach the conservative Christian peers. With time, he saw that this was not the case, and developed audience awareness skills that integrated self-censoring into his writing.

Eventually, Robert learned that he could not convert the conservatives into dialoguing. Consequently, the Internet emerges as a tool as much to self-actualize as it is to fulfill other agendas (Franklin, 2005, Banks, 2011; Landow, 2006; Morrell, 2008). Everything depended on the peer and the space. For jacklegs of the evangelicals, alt-right, sexists, racists, etc. variety, the Internet was a space to lay out their truths and try to force others to bend to their world view. For others, like Robert, the Internet was a gateway into learning about the world apart from their conservative surroundings. Robert’s experience showed one more and even more crucial moment: a liberation (Fanon, 1994; Fraire, 1996; Landow, 2006; Franklin, 2005, Anzaldua, 1987). From the early burden of reaching out to the conservatives, which lead to letting go of the self-censoring, Robert was able to engage in exploring new content and styles of writing.

Moderators and policing

What happens when trolling occurs in online spaces was described as a wide range of responses: from moderator involvement to peers leaving the space, the participants demonstrated that trolling elicited responses on a broad spectrum. Moderators are either peers who volunteer to

oversee discussions, or are hired staff who serve the same purpose. Regardless of platform or participation modality, moderators ensure that peers follow the pre-existing codes of conduct (if any exist), and that an accepted level of discourse is observed. Each moderated space has a drastically differing set of community rules which include specific “punishments” for misbehavior. In some instances, peer posts do not become visible until cleared by a moderator first. Being visible in online spaces begins with the crucial task of not being removed by moderators, and 21 participants stressed adherence to preexisting rules that govern each online space. It seemed that as free and ungoverned as Internet writing may be, moderators often stepped in to remove posts that were not consistent with the existing community rules. So, it becomes necessary to observe community rules explicitly in order to be allowed an audience in the first place. Even the role of moderator as well as community reaction to them varies from space to space. As Tom pointed out:

I know with 4Chan distinctly they have a pretty good system for that where users are moderators, and it will be somebody trying to post something very heinous and they’ll be just like ‘no’ and then it will say ‘deleted by a moderator’ and poof—gone. Very straight-forward. I noticed that on Reddit, that stuff causes a bit more drama. (...) it becomes this whole ‘oh I can’t believe that I was banned! This is ridiculous I’m going somewhere else! I’m never using a computer again!’ or like other websites are just going to be like whatever

Tom contrasted reactions to moderators across contexts. Here, community reactions varied, and were dictated by community expectations. Redditors, for instance, expressed a level of privilege and proprietary attitude towards their writing. They seemed to believe that they were above the stated rules and that moderators overstepped whenever they intervened. As Tom pointed out,

these writers believed that they are somehow special. On 4Chan, and on other platforms, the role of moderator is much more respected and removal of content did not lead to peers erupting in dramatic overtures.

Robert's experiences as a moderator on Christian gay sites demonstrated just how challenging moderating was, how much effort it took, and how complex the issues of resolving peer conflicts got. Robert said:

We had a group of people who were super moderators and moderators, so the super moderators would see the things that have been elevated to moderator whatever, or flagged. Anyone could flag anybody's stuff, so you could flag a post and say this violates rules, and you would say why and it would go to the moderator to decide if it would stay flagged, or they would message the person and say "change this so it can go back." If it got out of hand, eventually this huge discussion with a supermoderator forum about should we just shut down this thread? Or how do I respond to this? So sometimes threads would get shut down because they were so volatile that they were no longer productive. Other times, more moderators would spend more time there to kinda mediate the discussion. But you are dealing with people in time zones all around the world so if you don't have moderators in every time zone, sometimes things would get out of hand and sometimes you would have people staying up til 4 o'clock in the morning on this stupid message board – it's like can you guys just behave? Moderators couldn't just take stuff down. They would have to tell the person why they are taking stuff down.

Robert's descriptions of moderator intervention demonstrated that the process of keeping a community from breaking into all-out vitriol demanded a great deal of effort, time and

frustration. Robert and all other moderators were not employed by the AODS they served. Being a moderator was a major responsibility, and clearly being a moderator was an unpopular task. Yet, AODS peers saw the need to become involved at this level and devote personal time to ensuring that communities thrived and did not become hostile.

Policing by non-moderator community members was another strategy participants discussed to show how AODS could be rid of trolls. To understand how policing worked, participants first discussed how trolling could come about: thought in some instances trolling was perpetrated by violent individuals, it was sometimes a result of an interaction gone wrong. Sometimes disagreement arose, and eventually led to trolling. But, the rising trolling could also be halted by the community. Daniel discussed such scenarios when he said:

There are people out there that will say ‘dude, you don’t know what you’re talking about’ and there are others who will start negative comments and it becomes this whole trolling scenario. And I’m like—I just don’t know what to add to this so I either stay away from it or I’ll leave the page. All that negativity warps my mind into a negative reaction and I just can’t—I gotta get out of here.

Here, a gradual development of the trolling scenario was described: in Daniel’s experience, trolling was a progression of exchanges that culminated in an explosive, negative, and hard to read event. Daniel’s solution was to leave—he did not participate in the ongoing exchange, nor did he continue reading. Leaving the space as soon as he encountered trolling may have its drawbacks. For instance, Daniel may not see the resolutions that occur. On the other hand, there was no guarantee that there was a resolution to the conflict, so Daniel chose to self-care rather than care for the community or peers who were left behind. Daniel knew his strengths, and that was “walking away. I don’t wanna add fuel to that fire so I just walk away.” This might seem like

a selfish tactic, but it was also a healthy means of assuring that personal limits of tolerance were not extended (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998; Landow, 2006). In addition, Daniel specified that he did not want to increase any of the conflicts that were ongoing, even if he was involved. He chose to walk away and let the fire burn itself out.

Along with conflict arises another phenomenon: policing. This concept was described by Ian who sees policing take place often. After describing the violence he has witnessed on 4Chan, Ian specifies that

4Chan that's why [he] moved to Reddit mostly as Reddit is more policed (...) [by] moderators² (...) each subsection will have a moderator (...). They make sure that nobody goes too far.

The term policing is interesting because was positioned conflicts, and trolling in particular, as a criminal act. Policing also indicated that there was social accord and cohesion that was guided by regulations. YouTube was a space that received many complaints from my participants, specifically for featuring aggression and vitriol. But Daniel pointed out a channel where vlogger³ Casey Neistat carefully polices the replies he receives, points out any instances of trolling and addresses them in his next video:

he apparently goes through his comments so when he finds a negative comment or something he didn't like he will talk about it in his next video and he will be like 'guys no negativity or I will kick you out' so what's been happening is if somebody is negative or just really terrible, the other fans will point him out to Casey and Casey picks it up from there and that's something I saw that was interesting.

² In a moderated discussion, moderators have the ability to flag, remove, and ban peers who over-step community rules. In many online spaces, like Reddit for example, each discussion strand will have pre-determined specification for what is and what is not acceptable. Violating community rules may result in various punishments—the most extreme being banned from the platform all together.

³ Vlogging is the practice of blogging using video

This is extreme policing, but consistent with the nature of the channel which was intended to inspire viewers and spread positivity via YouTube. The concept of policing was also extended to the community's ability (Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Marshall, 2007; Davies, 2008; Coiro et. al., 2014) to report malfeasance to the person with the power (Bourdieu, 1991) to punish the wrong-doers. In the case of the CaseyNeistat channel, the care and dedication to securing a safe space are intense and intended to maintain a community that is welcoming and uplifting (Landow, 2006; Nakamura, 2008; Anzaldua, 1987; Loomba, 1998).

Policing was an appealing concept because it can also sprout up the real-world sub-category of policing: the neighborhood watch, or community policing. In these scenarios, members of the community who were not moderators, responded to bullying and trolling without waiting for the moderators to step in. Daniel described the community policing he observed, specifically on the Tumblr dedicated to the show *Supernatural*. In Daniel's words, the community "police each other" by gently rebuking peers who speak negatively about episodes. Daniel pointed to instances where peers replied to negativity by saying "there's no needs to say that" and "yes but they made it up with the rest of the show." Here, the community banded together (Yancey, 2011; Marshall, 2007; McLuhan, 1994) to ensure that the tone of conversation remained positive and supportive. By demonstrating what was not acceptable in the discourse (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006), the community worked collaboratively to edge out negative writing and model positive writing culture instead. Standing up for others as well as correcting untruths emerged as means of disempowering the trolls and hopefully scaring them away from the community—a way to "ring the bell." In Scandinavian mythology, trolls could be scared off by

the tolling of church bells, so it is a convenient way to describe any attempts to scare off or disengage trolls in the online spaces⁴.

Sami shared an experience where community members policed a troll. Sami was in charge of the discursive space, and as an entrepreneur, Sami invested much time and effort in cultivating a professional space where his advice and thoughts were read and shared by a community of other professionals. In a specific case, a peer erupted into a trolling spat after reading Sami's article about Chinese economy. The peer did not read the article carefully and engaged in attacking Sami. In response, the other peers came forward to defend Sami and point out that the troll was incorrect: "People in general said what they thought of it—and that it didn't relate to the rest of the article and it made no sense because the article was very different from what he thought the article was saying." Sami's solution to the problem was not to engage the troll, but to allow the community to share their dismay and "take the troll down" with a bell tolling technique of pointing out the troll's errors. In effect, Sami did not have to assume any responsibility for the troll's presence and words but simply allowed the community to single the troll out and articulate his errors.

Susan's experience showed another important side of community policing: the mutual responsibility community members have to each other (Marshall, 2007; Ito, 2013; Davies, 2008; Yancey, 2011; Landow, 2006; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). Susan noted that when trolling or disagreements occur:

a lot of people say 'no, calm down, it's just the Internet, just another video, everyone has an opinion, it's not that serious' but I agree with those people. (...) there are defiantly people who police [the community] (...) on health forums, because

⁴ For more information on Scandinavian lore, please see Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology: Comprising The Principal Popular Traditions And Superstitions Of Scandinavia, North Germany And The Netherlands*

everyone has a different experience, we all have to keep each other in check and if one person says something that differs from another person's experience, you know you have to keep an open mind when you are reading forums because the same thing that happened to one person will not necessarily happen to you and it's not like its fact based, so it's kinda taking it with a grain of salt.

On the one hand, Susan articulates that community members are responsible for keeping one another beholden to a particular way of communicating. On the other hand, Susan pointed out that online discussions should not be as consequential and thus not as upsetting as in-person relationships (Poster, 2013; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; McLuhan, 1994; Loomba, 1998; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009;). For Susan, the difference was grounded in the subjective nature of the forums she attended, and because of this nature, peers needed to be more open to a variety of voices and experiences (Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005; Loomba, 1998; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Morrell, 2008). In essence, Susan showed that the community shaped itself and rebuffed the intolerant voices trying to enter the discussions.

John also discussed his experiences with community policing and means of rebuffing trolls. Conflicts, policing, and rebuffing trolls were often intertwined, and needed to be understood from the vantage point of community responses. In John's estimation, there was a spectrum of responses to trolling:

there's usually two sides. There's the everyone has an opinion side, and the 'you are an idiot' side. There could be the side of 'hey, here's what I'm saying' and then there's the side of 'you're stupid for saying that' because the Internet is anonymous and why talk crap to your face? Occasionally [people try to educate]. That's more so my path: just put down information but there's more so opinions.

John showed that being ethical is one way of gaining desired effects in spats with trolls. Instead of joining the bell tolling peers, John tried to provide information, educate, or “kill them with kindness.” For John, these tactics were more productive when facing violent outbursts.

The various conflicts and behaviors that arise in response to conflicts online were merely a reflection of escalated social relationships that occurred in all aspects of life (Poster, 2013; McLuhan, 1994; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006). It was interesting how observing these conflicts online, or even participating in them, helped crystalize so many response tactics. In essence, analyzing online conflicts can help anyone understand how to spot conflicts, how to navigate them, and how to remain “sane” in face of it all regardless of the space we may find ourselves in (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Alvermann, 2010; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Buckingham, 2003; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006).

At times, trolling abounded in even the most measured AODS. Participants pointed out that, before the act of writing could take place, writers had to read through previous posts appearing in forums to ascertain the general mood of the space (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). Robert pointed out that in some AODS, even the most seasoned writers deeded to rely on such techniques as fact checking and grammar checking peers to help police the space—something that became obvious during the 2016 presidential election:

I harshly judge people on their writing. If it's someone I am irritated with, yes [I point out their grammatical mistakes] I will totally correct their entire paragraph and repost it “what you mean was...” just if it's just one of those comments that you don't need to respond to, but I will help you with your grammar and syntax.

The higher the stakes of a discussion, the more agitated peers became, and taking a position becomes a crucial reaffirmation of the poster's identity (Poster, 2013; Gee, 2007; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Landow, 2006; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Darder & Uriarte, 2013). During the 2016 election cycle, Robert described a rhetorical situation where he became a vigorous fact-checker, and argued extensively against fake news, lies, and misrepresentations that the "Republican" side of the debate was producing. Here Robert showed the need to be a savvy debater, and assiduous rhetorician able to dismantle fallacious evidence and process ideas in an accessible way. A part of making the counter-argument work is to make sure that the original poster sees beyond their own conviction, and often this meant going beyond pointing out the flaws in their arguments. Some peers were so convinced of the rightness of their ideas, that pointing out the flaws in their thinking was not a strong enough strategy on its own.

To begin, Robert discussed the way in which he approaches dismantling the ideas of others: the first step was to understand and take apart the logic of the original post. In this process, Robert showed the need to point out contradictions or falsehoods. The second step was to dismantle the support used: Robert looked at the political affiliations of the sources, the ideologies they espoused, and quality of information produced.

And if all else fails, taking apart of the poster's grammar, and sentence construction become a viable and frequently used tool to diminish power, discredit the poster, and undercut the point the poster was trying to make (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; Darder & Uriarte, 2013; Bourdieu, 1991; McLuhan, 1994). The grammatical attack may seem petty, but both the survey and interview participants agreed and are stuck on using grammar as a measure of a person's intelligence and ability to provide credible information. The grammar/syntax attack was actually a way to take away power from trolls and to battle against misinformation in online spaces. It was an act of

community policing and establishing rules of acceptable behavior. In a way, building authority in online spaces was an exercise in defending more than one's ideas—it was a political act connected with the need to stand up to bullies and trolls (Morrell, 2008; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Banks, 2011; Landow, 2006; Selfe & Selfe, 2011).

Despite trolling being a well used term, it became apparent, that not all trolls described were all that bad, and not all trolling behaviors were all that mean. At the heart of the issue was the matter of community standards: what was acceptable in one community was deemed as unacceptable in other communities. Issues of wording, level of argumentation, and even standards for proof differed widely from participant to participant and context to context. Simply put, the term “troll” was no longer sufficient to describe all of the variances of behavior of an expansive range of peers. But the mere existence of the term and the wide-spread insistence on it provides a window into how eagerly the public is to vilify any miss-steps online. “Troll” is a synonym for bullying and violence, yet the term is deprived of context or nuance. In this instance, it is the broader public, especially the protectionists, who need to be educated about the nature of the Internet discursive spaces. Working towards an equitable Internet that is not vilified or ignored is a challenge, and to a large extent, the protectionists are the group most in need of reeducating. In part, the protectionists need to realize how complex the cultures and communities are online. The presence of community standards, moderation tactics, and discursive practices are all points that protectionists are not familiar with. To them, all Internet spaces are the same, all are vile, and must be taken away from young people.

Positive Writing Culture

Despite noting that the online world does not have firm or established writing norms, many participants described an idealized version of online writing. Survey participants wanted to see

“manners” or a courteous etiquette used in online comments and reviews. 55 of participants specifically discussed wanting to see a level of civility in online discourses. Politeness emerged as opposition to trolling, bullying, and rudeness. Participants also acknowledged that being courteous was largely a personal choice, since most forums and reviews were not moderated for niceness. As one participant said “Personally, I would hope that people keep in mind being courteous and considerate to others, but there is not a ‘manners police’ roaming the many discussion boards and social media outlets on the Internet.” The hope for communal standards is an attempt to establish an etiquette that can prevent the rise of trolling. The participant also discussed the lack of organized moderating bodies, and pointed out that, implicitly, that not all trolling is actionable. After all, being rude is not the same thing as spreading hate speech. The line between the two may be blurry in online settings, but the participants were aware of the distinction.

Participants coupled the wish for courteous writing with a desire to see truthfulness in the posts and reviews. Truth emerged as crucial, especially in reviews, where writers occupied a position of power and influence (Bourdieu, 1991; McLuhan, 2001). Interestingly, the survey participants were not dismissive of the value of personal experience here: quite the opposite. The participants expressed that online writers needed to describe their own experience truthfully. One participant said that online reviewers need to “Be very specific about likes and dislikes Share a full experience- [without] be[ing] vague” while another participant thought all reviewers should wonder whether “what [they were] writing[is] accurate and fair?” and one cautioned that online writers should not “be mean or rude, but be honest.”

Other participants used words like *truthful*, *factual*, *honest*. This was an important positioning of the personal in online writing as it opened up the door for a peaceful coexistence of many

opinions and varying experiences. Here, the participants yet again expressed a vision for the type of community they wished to see flourish in online spaces: a community that comprises of members who self-select to be kind as opposed to rude, tell the truth as opposed to sensationalize, fabricate, or lie. These opinions emerged as powerful counter-arguments to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944) work. The "culture industry" is a reality well acknowledged and existing—the idea of an online review for a book or film is itself evidence of that industry. Yet, as opposed to the brainwashing power that Adorno and Horkheimer proposed, the online review acts as a voice of the people and a means of battling against any ideology, in Marx and Engles' (1973) sense, that the ruling classes behind the culture industry might attempt to sell to the masses. The participants framed the opposition in terms of honest participation. Lies, it seemed, belonged in the realm of sponsored or corporate agendas. Truth was aligned with the personal and communal effort to care for one another.

As a group, the participants had a clear idea of behaviors that ought to be demonstrated in online spaces. Rather than engage in protectionist (Debord, 1998, 2014; Postman, 1992; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012) outbursts that ended with a stern call to avoidance, my participants focused on describing behaviors that they preferred to engage in when they used online spaces. For instance, Justin called for reviewers to give businesses and service providers the benefit of the doubt. He contrasted the writing he saw on Yelp with the writing he would like to see:

People will be like 'worse service I've ever seen—don't know what there're doing' but me, I like to give people the benefit of the doubt: what if it's their first day? What if there're still learning? Or like maybe they had a bad day? Maybe someone broke up with them or their resident had a panic attack. You never know.

Justin brought forth an important point about the humanity and compassion that ought to be practiced when composing online reviews. This was a plea to allow people to be people—not automatons devoid of feeling or ability to err (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Landow, 2006). Justin specifically noted that there may be reasons beyond a customer’s knowledge for why a service was sub-par, and we all ought to take note and remember that servers, chefs, and service providers are human beings. Here, Justin was calling for more subjectivity (Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Poster, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b) to be developed: he wanted the writers to remember their own humanity and to acknowledge that of others in the world.

Other participants echoed Justin’s feelings about the need and pleasure (Gee, 2007; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Vygotsky, 1978; Ito, 2013) of creating positive writing on the Internet. Oliver discussed the personal and communal benefits of writing positive reviews from a different perspective. For him, the reason to write positive reviews was to show appreciation and give recognition to the service providers: “When I write a review it’s not for me—it’s for them to recognize the greatness of what they did.” Here, the review becomes a tap on the shoulder and a thumbs up to the proprietors.

In addition to providing feedback to proprietors and acknowledging the subjectivity of the service industry, writing online reviews was a way to re-live pleasurable experiences, share the joy with a community, and engage in cross-platform maneuvering. Susan found great pleasure in writing positive reviews:

[I enjoy the] positive [reviews] (...) positive reviews are defiantly uplifting. It makes you feel good when you purchase something good or when you experience something good, so you want to share that.

Susan saw writing on the Internet as a means of spreading joy. She wanted others to be able to enjoy not only a great purchase, but she wanted to partake in the pleasure of writing about a great experience. The positive review was thus a means of reflecting and re-living a pleasurable moment, and a means of documenting this pleasure for others' reference. The writing of a positive review was a means of sharing once-felt pleasure with a community online (Marshall, 2007; Davies, 2008; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, Jenkins, 2008, 2009).

Robert recalled a specific instance where he was asked to write a review after an incredibly great experience at a car shop:

[the service] was just great so we were talking about Yelp and [the shop owner] said please review us, and I did. I wrote him a couple of paragraphs and gave him 5 stars and shred it on Facebook. I don't typically share yelp on Facebook, but I have friends who need this.

Robert demonstrated that writing positive reviews was not merely about re-living the nice experience, and was more than showing appreciation to the service provider: it was a service to the community of both friends and strangers via multi-platform interaction (Ito, 2013; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

Building a positive online writing culture involved more than sharing nice things about a great experience: writers needed to know how to address problematic moments that may arise. Daniel shared his approach to these moments: "I never try to be intentionally mean. I try to critique other people's work so I'm like 'oh my god this is great or you could have done something better.'" Daniel used the constructive criticism approach to ensure that he was not being hurtful while providing feedback on less than stellar experience.

Creating a positive writing culture online was an ongoing process that entailed peer dedication, self-awareness, and recognition of other peer subjectivity. While some peers were motivated to produce writing that was hateful, it was up to other peers to continue composing according to personal ethics. As Daniel noted, being a positive example was more powerful than scolding trolls—as he said, “when others tell me what to do, I just don’t.” Serving as an example and keeping faithful to their ethical conviction helped survey participants become examples (Davies, 2008; Yancey, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978) for the rest of the communities (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2010; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b) they frequented. Their writing became the voice that helped to shape the acceptable norms of behaving and writing in online spaces (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Alvermann, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009).

Participation: Lurkers, writers, power writers

In the last section, I examined the peer cultures that developed, and continue to develop in the AODS spaces. Issues of anonymity, positive and negative cultures, assorted trolling, and community responses to trolling were examined in detail. Although the section might have seemed bleak, I believed it was a necessary part that showed how stereotyping of online participation and peer writing was contrasted with the ideas my participants developed about their engagement with these cultures, and how they judged the engagement of others.

In this section, I examined the participation stances and roles that my participants discussed. The participants named several modes of participation that they rotated through in their online participation. Most of the modalities were connected with the motivation and intent, some were emotionally motivated, and some were derived from the over-all life aspirations and goals the participants had.

Lurking

The initial part of engaging in any online situation is connected with looking—be it with eyes or with machinery that describes/reads to us. After all, before we can do anything on a computer or smart phone, we must access the spaces by entering text. Some people might be talented enough to select the typing field with their eyes closed, but for the rest of us, looking on the screen is necessary before we plant our cursor and start to pound at the keyboard. A survey participant's response illustrated this point when discussing the benefits of encountering various points of view online: "You get to gain a greater understanding of other people's thought process and point of view." The participant here drew attention to the act of seeing as opposed to other engagement—it was an acknowledgment of the power of passive participation, or lurking, and showed that observing was as powerful as acting in online settings. Indeed, this participant established the need for any beginner online peer to discover the power of "listening" without interrupting. After all, effective communication is inherently discursive and that requires both speaking and listening. Without listening, we miss out on the chance to become open minded to various points of view. In terms of online participation, observation through reading of posts and reviews took the place of listening and served each beginner peer as a means of identifying what patterns of participation were valued by respective communities (Fanon, 1994; Freire, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Davies, 2008).

Lurking was often defined as a passive behavior of observing an online space without contributing to it. In other words, peers who read discussions, but did not write comments, were seen as lurkers. It was a rather sinister description and evoked images of stalkers or creeps in the shadows, on the periphery, and never in the light or the center, watching without being seen. But I thought lurking was not as passive or invisible as that description and imagery might suggest. I

saw lurking as active—reading was an act, therefore lurking in online spaces was active to the extent that the peer was engaged in the act of reading, and might not have been moved to write just yet. All lurkers, in other words, have the potential to turn into writers. Lurkers chose to stay on the periphery, and that was an exercise of power (Bourdieu, 199; Fanon, 1994). They were allowed to be invisible to others and watch what happened without the danger of being observed while remaining informed and learning (Morrell, 2008; Fanon, 1994; Fraire, 1996).

Tom is a self-described lurker because he more often reads online content than writes it. “I would say that writing is the least predominant. I will most often go and watch videos and listen to podcasts or read.” Although he insists he is a lurker, Tom’s participation is vigorous because he reads a great deal and engages in deep fact-checking of the content he consumes. Despite being remarkably self-aware, Tom does not see the full scope of the activities and meanings they carry with them in online spaces. For one, he says that there are not many places to put Internet learning into practice. Yet, he does not put enough faith in his own knowledge and expertise to write posts online. Tom is unwilling to take on the voice of authority, or to pioneer a non-expert way of writing in online spaces. Tom actively rejects the power to write, or rather, he exercises the power not to write. This may seem ironic, but choosing not to write online, for whatever reason, is still a choice (Bourdieu, 1991) and one that is fraught with as many issues as the choice to write (Fraire, 1996; Morrell, 2008; Fanon, 1994). The ironic part here is that restraining his participation is indeed putting into action the knowledge he has gained from observing online spaces.

Tom shows the sad reality that the cacophony of the Internet can sometimes drown out a singular voice.

I use websites like Reddit or 4Chan or stuff like that and even then I very rarely post anything and it's only because—like I said before, your comment is just going to get thrown up in the air and end up in nothing. Because I feel like my comment has no credibility to it, then what's the point? I'd rather just observe, fact check, and go about my day.

Tom feels that there is often no point to sharing his thoughts because he will not receive the recognition. In essence, this point mirrors Susan's feelings of wanting to reach an audience and being disappointed when an audience is just not there. Tom chooses not to add to the number of voices on discussion boards, because to him, his own lack of expertise excludes him from making a valuable contribution. Tom is being humble here and poses a contrast to Oliver's observation that many online writers exhibit hubris and see their opinion as absolutely needing to be shared.

In a world that increasingly stereotypes media use (Postman, 1992), including online writing and online writers as self-centered, both Oliver and Tom emerged as voices countering and protesting those stereotypes. Both discussed their hesitation to produce any writing and seeing their opinions as not important enough to be shared with the world. John also spoke against the stereotype of a self-important Millennial: "I don't go full blown into reviews on things especially cuz not everyone does that and who really cares." Here, John showed that his opinion may not carry much weight, and he did not want to spend time crafting a review that would either be ignored, or in general, does not add anything of value to the overall discourse (Gee, 2001; Kress, 2003; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006).

Here, the participants were self-effacing enough not to believe in the power of their own voices and chose not to speak into the "void." They also believed that others have already expressed

similar ideas with far greater skill than they could have. This sentiment was widely shared by interview participants—48 discussed similar feelings. Sean, and Daniel both specified that they never helped other peers in discussion spaces because someone had already done so, and so they felt that their writing would be useless. Sadly, none of the participants considered that both perspective and articulation played a part in successful communication. So, although an answer to a question may have been posted, sharing a different example or explaining the same sentiment in other words may have helped other peers who may have needed additional explanation. Subsequently, though the void may seem gaping, or even filled with tons of answers, it is precisely the wide plurality of voices that was needed to keep the medium both robust and helpful. Here AODS emerge as far larger than social media spaces which tend to be limited by the boundaries of a peer's social network (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Ito, 2013). AODS are open to the whole world, and the writing produced can be read by anyone in the world with the right access. Lurking emerged as a means to empower peers who were not ready to create writing on their own. However, in many ways, lurking is a position of power for any peer who is interested in learning about the world beyond their immediate reality. Any person in a precarious social position or in physical danger may be unwilling to or unable to post their own writing. However, being able to read the writing of others still permits peers to gain entry into a discussion via the act of seeing the topics discussed, the interactions unfolding, and resources posted. Lurking may indeed be a means for achieving personal liberation even if it may not be fully attainable in the physical world.

Power writers

Lurking was an extreme stance that was often taken up by peers who felt too timid or irrelevant to contribute to discussions or reviews. An opposing extreme is the “power writer,” or a peer

who is interested in building up a reputation and becoming recognized as an author in whatever space they chose to focus on. Power writers wrote frequently, in great volumes, and attended to their writing on a regular basis to keep up the popularity of the post. Power writers were usually marked by the platform with some sort of status symbol or achievement badge. On Amazon, reviewers get a title of Top Reviewer, and on Reddit and Imgur, peers receive digital trophies to denote the level of their status. Achieving these status symbols is a time consuming and laborious process that demands dedication, time, and effort.

To become a power review writer, peers must first master the genre and style of review popular on the platform they aspire to impress. The review provided writers an opportunity to share ideas, care for one another in the form of opinion transmission, and most of all, practice writing. As participants in the survey and in the interviews note, there were no proscribed ways to write reviews (Yancey, 2011; Davies, 2008), and writers learned from observing what others have written prior (Lankshear & Knobe, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Gee, 2007). For some review writers, there was not much at stake, and like Michael, the review was a minimal piece stating approval or disapproval. But for other writers, online reviews had higher stakes. Like Robert, Susan discussed her aspirations as a writer. She described spending a significant amount of time on writing a lengthy review, and shared her feelings of disappointment on not receiving any feedback on her writing:

One time I wrote basically an essay about a product that I purchased and I got no feedback, which was upsetting because I thought I wrote a really good review, very honest too. And it was a very expensive item so I felt like people would refer to the reviews for it, but who knows. I got like one thumbs up.

Here, Susan's aspirations were integral to her choice of her mode of participation (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Ito, 2013; Davies, 2008; Yancey, 2011). Both Susan and Robert take great pride in the review writing process. But unlike Susan, Robert received feedback and knew that he had reached an audience. Susan did not have a similar reassurance. It was possible that her review was read, but the lack of confirmation through electronic means suggested to Susan that there was no audience interested in reading her work (Hall, 2012; Lievrouw, 2001; Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007). Further, because she did not receive accolades from the community, her aspirations were not served by her one-time effort.

Participation threshold

The world of online participation can be broken down into reading and writing. We looked at the two extreme stances of lurking and power writing, but what motivated a lurker to become a writer? The decision to start writing was a big step for many participants, and once it was made, they were lurkers no more. In essence, the examination of the participation threshold showed that AODS counter Debord's theory of passive media consumption (2014, 1998). Yes, online discussions may be seen as "spectacle," and yes, participants often stayed on the sideline and "lurked." But there came a point that a lurker cracked her knuckles, took a deep breath and started to type. Many participants discussed the specific motivators that caused them to move from being a "lurker" (a reader who does not disclose his/her presence and only limits their participation to reading other peers' writing) to writing posts or responses. I called this moment the participation threshold. There were many reasons for lurkers to enter into discussions, but one of the more interesting choices was ethical motivation (see Figure 18).

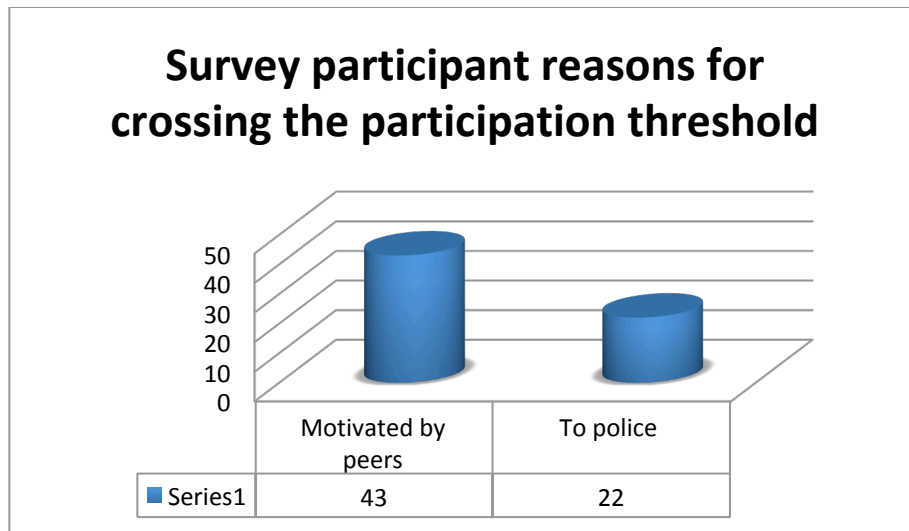


Figure 18: Survey participant reasons for crossing the participation threshold

As shown by Figure 18, 43 participants said that their entry into discussions are motivated by strong feelings about the actions of others, and 22 stated that they joined discussions to help police trolling, lying, or intimidating behaviors. One participant said: “I only comment if I have a strong reaction. (...) I usually only comment on people I don't know on threads if I really, really disagree with them.” While another participant remarked that they participated in online discussions “rarely. When [they] do, it's typically a social or political post that is extremely ignorant, offensive, or disempowering, and I feel the need to do my part to educate.” The two responses exemplify participation thresholds at which an online participant shifted positions of power and decided to move from the more passive stance as lurker to a more agentive position as writer. Participants who stated that they wrote in online settings “rarely. Only in response of outlandish remarks or incorrect claims” or who noted that “usually there are some people who like to say false information to simply get a rise out of everyone commenting, then there are other who like to explain what is going on exactly” demonstrated how a powerful jolt can motivate a lurker to become a writer. It seemed that powerful personal opinions as well as desire

for social justice (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998; Morrell, 2008) operated as equally potent motivators and could break a participant's hesitations to write.

Crossing the participation threshold is not only a matter of ensuring that the community was policed or that the peer had an opportunity to respond. Another powerful reason to cross the participation threshold were powerful emotions that online content sparked for the participants. Rose said that writing negative reviews was often the situation with the highest participation threshold: "I don't like putting reviews especially when you are negative because I don't wanna seem like a negative Nancy." Here, Rose discussed hesitation that was based on her desire not to be type-cast as a negative person. In Rose's case, she was motivated not to write negative reviews in order to prevent dragging a reputation of a restaurant or salon down—unless she had "something to say." Once she felt the urge to share her opinion, she crossed the participation threshold and produced either a review, or a discussion post, or stepped in to defend others who were being trolled. The key here was that Rose needed to feel that her contribution was valuable and not a waste of time. In this sense, Rose echoed Tom's sentiments, but was more likely to cross the participation threshold than he was.

The practice of writing negative reviews carried a heavy burden for some writers, so the participation threshold was relatively high, and the process was taken seriously (Bourdieu, 1991; Buckingham, 2003; Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Davies, 2008; Marshall, 2007). Robert said that he has "written a couple of really unpleasant reviews when It was like ridiculous – like you should not be in business. I was like how do you have customers in here?" The negative reviews Robert produced were long, and specific. The time investment Robert described was extensive, and the act of writing was framed as a service to others more so than a revenge scenario.

However, there are more reasons to compose negative reviews. As Susan noted: “I write negative reviews out of anger so I don’t like that.” Here the negative review was not intended as a harmful or vein pursuit, but as a way to achieve catharsis. But even in the act of composing a review that would give an outlet for her feelings, Susan noted that the process was unpleasant, and the unpleasantness was a high participation threshold to cross. Reaching the participation threshold was difficult for many participants and centered around issues of power, purpose, and audience. It seemed that participants did not always feel that their voice was welcomed, so like Susan, they restricted their participation to moments of feeling confident in their words. Others needed to feel a powerful stimulant in the form of emotions in order to cross the participation threshold.

Modalities

Today’s technology is advanced, and like we saw, information technology moved far beyond text. Similarly, online composition and forms of participation had evolved beyond textual input. Online writers used many modalities (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007) to document their experiences. Despite taking a strong stance against writing negative reviews, Daniel used the star rating to express dissatisfaction.

I have been to some terrible places and I don’t review against them cuz this guy is at least trying in some way. SO I’m not gonna go in and trash it. I always feel terrible if I would do that. I’d rather avoid it. Maybe I’d give it a star—but that’s all you are getting. Yeah that’s all you are getting. Cuz you get a rating of 5 stars and you can be like “sorry buddy—one star—that’s all you’re getting” but I don’t do that avidly.

The written review, emerged as a more high-stakes rhetorical situation than the star-rating (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; Lievrouw, 2001; Hall, 2012). Both writing a review and assigning a star rating were agentic situations where the reviewer expressed their opinion, but to Daniel, the

written piece was more damaging, more lasting, and more impactful. He was weary of hurting a restaurant's reputation, but did not believe the star rating was as powerful in that process. This logic was consistent with Daniel's description of how he saw reviews: a single bad written review was enough to deter him from going to a restaurant, yet a poor star rating did not have the same impact on his decision. The star rating system was a cumulative average from all visitors, so it seemed that, for Daniel, being a part of an over-all opinion was more comfortable than being a unique voice.

Multimedia. Reading and writing are an interlaced set of processes. But what happens when reading and writing become enmeshed with multimedia? Internet spaces offered writers the ability to present ideas including much more than text: images, gifs, music, hyperlinks, and many other multi-media tools are available and used by writers in online forums (Ito, 2013). In order to use these tools effectively, writers first needed to grasp where they were, who they were likely to encounter, and what they wanted to accomplish. In essence, writers and readers had to be comfortable with recontextualization (Barton & Hamilton, 2005) of multimodal (Kress, 2003; Davies, 2008; Vasudevan, 2006; Alvermann 2008) tools (Gee, 2007). On both sides of the composing act was imagination and coding-decoding of the message. Kress (2003) described the great and open field of possibilities that multimodality carried with it, and showed that there was a greater amount of freedom to be had in the interpretive act. The multimodality of online texts did not force either readers or writers to follow a linear path and enabled each to produce messages that were open to interpretation and thus resisted formatting and styling that relied on pre-existing systems of power (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; McLuhan, 1994, 2001; Davies, 2008; Vasudevan, 2006; Alvermann 2008).

Survey participants discussed multimedia components (see Figure 19),

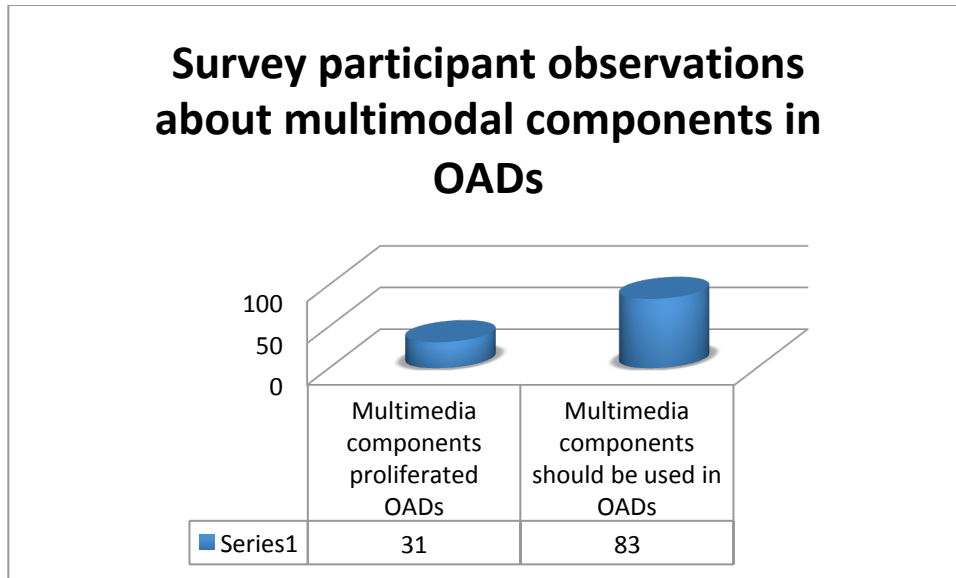


Figure 19: Survey participants observations about multimodal content in AODS

As shown by Figure 19: 31 participants saw the prevalence and strength of multi-media components in AODS. 83 participants called for the usage of multi-media tools, be they hyperlinks or emojis, in online writing. One participant wrote that “For particularly complex issues graphic illustrations are necessary for simplification” and another noted that in online spaces, “gifs are a huge one! But if someone is trying to prove their point, they often back their views up with YouTube videos/articles.” Two points were highlighted: graphic components were necessary to help convey content, but some multimedia content was valued more than other forms. Although the looping gif was seen as additive and valuable, it was seen as rhetorically weaker than hyperlinks to video materials or articles. Gifs were seen as a means of simplifying while hyperlinks were seen as explanatory.

In general, there were several “camps” of thought about the place of graphic components in AODS (see Figure 20).

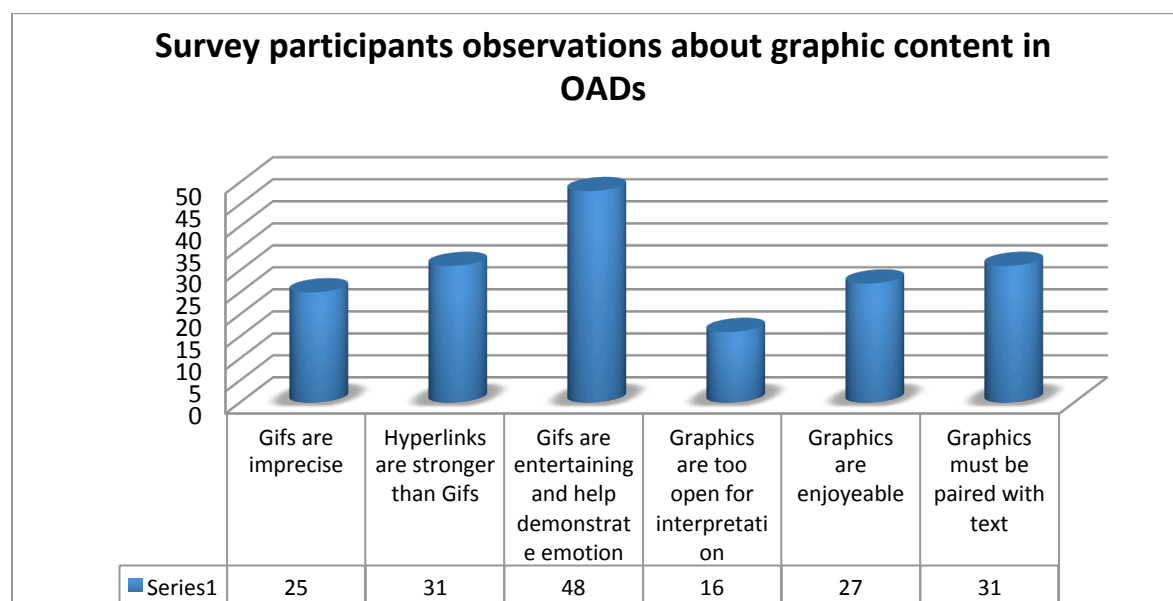


Figure 20: Survey participants observations about graphic content in AODS

As demonstrated by Figure 20, 16 participants believed that non-textual content was too open for interpretation. On another hand, 27 participants enjoyed and appreciated seeing non-textual component and showed a great enthusiasm for the various possibilities: “I LOVE EMOJIS AND BITMOJIS because they can be silly and fun to use and sometimes the faces they make can express how I’m feeling better than I ever could with words. Pictures are worth a thousand words.” However, 31, believed that non-textual components needed to be “paired with a description (whether it be text or in the image/video/etc), they are better than text-only comments. But that heavily depends on the quality of the non-text medium” as well as “They’re helpful only if you understand the nature of the commenting. (Like you understand tumblr subculture or YouTube subculture).” The last two responses showed that the world of multimodal (Kress, 2003) additions was a complex web of images and motion, and reinforce Hall’s (2012) analysis that

media images could resist analysis due to their vagueness. But additionally, we saw that possessing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991), or a shared frame of reference (Nakamura, 2008) enabled online readers and writers to succeed in various contexts more easily. However, images without accompanying text were easy to misinterpret or frustrate outsiders to this particular discourse community's (Gee, 2001) ways of communicating. Multimodal (Kress, 2003) pieces were crafted as a result of communal (Alvermann 2008; Marshall, 2007; Nakamura, 2008; Jenkins 2008, 2009) effort, and without any input from educators (Yancey, 2011, Buckingham, 2003).

Additionally, we saw a specific criticism of gifs and other forms of multimedia. 25 participants said graphic content was necessary to convey emotions and dispel any confusion about the written part of AODS posts. Gifs and other graphic content become a form of metalanguage (Barthes, 1972). But unlike Barthe's *myths*, gifs transgressed the notion of simple perversion and prostitution of messages towards selling of material ideas and imperial ideologies. Gifs were a means of becoming different types of messages that altered meaning based on context.

Participants also saw the need to use other types of content to prove points—You Tube videos and hyperlinks to articles were favored by 31 participants over gifs, which seemed to be relegated to the realm of entertainment and emotional expression by 48 participants. In essence, gifs were seen as trivial multimedia content as were emojis and bitmojis. But hyperlinks and links to videos were—regardless of what they led to. The appearance of a hyperlink or You Tube link were enough to give the impression of being more credible and better rhetorical choices when a peer was trying to establish credibility (Ito et. al, 2013).

It was important to note that the participants were anticipating Stuart Hall's (2012), Gunther Kress' (2003), and Lisa Nakamura's (2008) points about media messages, specifically that they

were imprecise and could be hard to interpret. Online writing entered the realm of imprecise multimedia messages (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, Nakamura, 2008; Hall, 2012), and so there was a need to layer the messages to ensure as little vagueness as possible. The value and effect of each multimedia object might determine the success of the writer and the enjoyment of the reader. The writer must successfully recontextualize (Barton & Hamilton, 2005) a piece of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991), and the reader might then judge the strength of the two processes through voting, following, replying, or ignoring the post.

In addition to reading text critically, online readers and writers had to develop strategies for reading and using multimedia tools such as images and gifs (Barthes, 1972; Kress, 2003; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). For some, like Oliver, the presence of multimedia was a sign of poor writing skills and a distraction from the message being produced. But participants, like Robert, see multimedia very differently:

[multimedia] enhance the writing. Unless it's –actually I can't think of a situation that for me it would not enhance the experience! (...) I blog I try to incorporate some kind of visual media and not just the text cuz it breaks it up and people. I think in general people don't read anything anymore. They get bored from paragraph a to paragraph b. there is the TLDR [too long didn't read] version, so I think extra stuff kinda keeps their attention.

As a journalist and a creative writer, Robert was deeply concerned with the whims of online readers. He was aware that the reading strategies for online content vary for many online peers from the reading strategies they employed offline. For Robert, the enhancement of the act of reading came in the form of dividing the text with images or gifs in order to keep the reader's attention and to take full advantage of the medium of the Internet (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007).

Text-heavy spaces online were, as Robert notes, boring and difficult for readers to stay focused on. But the usage of multimedia was an enhancement and a way to keep the reader interested.

John's process for understanding gifs was similar to Daniel's: both men based their understanding of gifs on the ones they have seen posted in humorous discussions:

first you wait for them to load, then you watch them through a couple of loops and figure out where it starts and where it ends and you can shorten a portion of a video and put it on a loop without sound (...) sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's not.

Usually (...) gifs are on the funny side, not on the joke side but a cue thing.

Both men suggested that gifs show up more in humorous conversations because humor leaves the rhetorical field more open to play in both the composing and interpretative acts. There was less danger in misunderstanding humorous conversations because of the agreed upon tone and the low-stake setting of the discourse (Marshall, 2007; Alvermann, 2008; Markiewicz, 2014; Vasudevan, 2006; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). In these spaces, both readers and writers used play as the primary organizing factor. Understanding a gif in the context of humor may be simpler—we already know that it is intended to make us laugh, and we know that it is intended as a reaction to the original content.

Knowledge Literacies

AODS function as additive educational spaces (Coiro et. al., 2014), based on social exchanges (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Scribner and Cole, 1978, 2001). One participant described online spaces as “Basically, for me, can help expand an idea on whatever one is commenting on.” Here the participant showed that online discussions and reviews were not merely focused on communication, but allowed readers and writers to engage in a form of furthering (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). The furthering described here was knowledge-based, but other forms of growth

were also possible in the online environment. Survey participants discussed the AODS capacity for enhancing their literacies formation (see Figure 21).

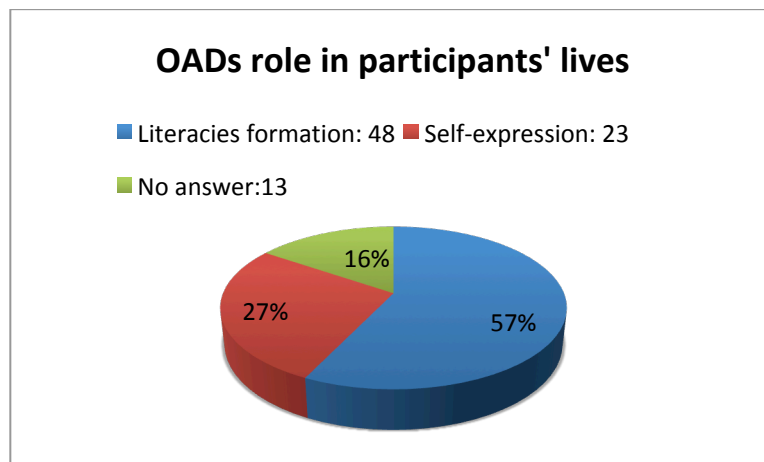


Figure 21: AODS role in participants' lives

As seen in Figure 21, expansion of informational literacies, and skills literacies was described by 48 participants and stood in opposition to 23 participants who described online spaces as serving self-expression. Although the two groups may seem in opposition to one another, both agree that there is value to participation in online spaces.

The participants overwhelmingly rated their participation in online discussions and reviews as useful and valuable, and I also asked them what specifically they believed they were learning. I wanted the participants to reflect and tease out some of the skills, theories, or literacies that came from the online participation as opposed to school or home. For 28 participants, participating in online discussions was about exploring personal interests such as:

- “Chemistry/Physics, politics, computer science / programming, software tutorials, business terminology,”
- “alien humanoids, dimensional jumping,”
- “food, travel, military, nutrition, comic books,”

- “news, pop culture, current events, feminism, reproductive rights, philosophy, music, fashion, books, cooking, social justice, religious discrimination, global culture, and television.”

This was an incredibly wide range of interests. Even the first quoted list described the participant’s personal interest as opposed to academic courses of study. What we see here is another instance of socially-based (Scribner & Cole, 1978) literacies that were connected to community belonging (Goody & Watt, 1968) and extended into many directions of literacies and enjoinderment (Ito et. al, 2013). But most importantly, the participants showed an interest in an ongoing education, which was necessary for personal liberation and eventual liberation of others through praxis (Freire, 1996).

The participants pointed to online spaces acting as a source of information for a wide variety of interests. The list here can be roughly divided into theoretical literacies (chemistry, physics, philosophy), practical skill literacies (computer programming, nutrition, fashion), cultural literacies (social justice, global cultures, feminism), and pop culture literacies (music, fashion, beauty). Remarkably, the same portals were used to access information on each of these topics. Places like Reddit, and Quora, are named by 31 participants as regular reading and provider of critical information. So, from this set of responses, we see that online forums acted as reference material, entertainment source, skill builder, and knowledge repository. The forums were used in a variety of ways depending on the purpose given to them by the communities frequenting them.

Public Writing

Participating as a writer in any AODS meant that the writing accomplished would be visible publicly. Regardless of purpose or space, AODS function as open spaces to a greater or lesser

extent. Because of the open nature of AODS, visualizing audiences was a difficult task, and visualizing context for writing was be just as challenging. However, it seemed that the survey participants were quite fluent in naming and discussing the issues of context of various online platforms. Interestingly, this knowledge was the only boundary participants were consciously drawing between various spaces of participation: the technological and social contexts that surrounded the writing produced (Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

27 participants discussed the structure of writing in online spaces: “Anything you write that you intend for someone else to read should be structured in an easy to follow format, such as leaving a space between paragraphs.” Here, the participant pointed to the technological nature of writing for screens (either computer or mobile) where document formatting tools, like tabs for new paragraph opening, may not exist, ease of reading is expected, and a global audience at various reading levels should be expected (Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005; McLuhan, 2001; Spivak, 1990). The participant showed that they are keenly aware of the challenges online readers face, and suggested formatting that can ease reading troubles. The emerging genre of public online writing is more visually impactful (Kress, 2003) and communally driven (Yancey, 2011).

A secondary concern for the participants was the etiquette that public online writing should feature. The call to be “professional” in online discussions was a way for the participants to suggest that public writing should look and behave in ways appropriate to the work place. This was an interesting proposition since online writing is anything but work-place based. Interestingly, the participants are ahead in terms of understanding the impact that anyone’s online participation may have on their lives: two clashing ideas could be used to understand the phenomenon: on the one hand, we could use the “global village” theory (McLuhan, 2001) and assume that the process of globalization was causing hybridity between peoples (Bhabha, 1994).

However, I saw that as naïve, especially given the recent historical context, and tend to favor the view framing the Internet as a networking of a splintered world, and a means of preserving various subjectivities (Loomba, 1998; Lievrouw, 2001). Loomba's and Lievrouw's theories are far more aligned with the opinions of my participants who saw that "audience" is a complex and complicated set of individuals.

So although online participation was an "extracurricular" activity, the public nature of the writing produced had necessarily been added to the representation of any peer's character. Today, we are increasingly tied to our online participation, and we should be—the view that online writing is somehow unreal or unrelated to our true characters is a suggestion that people are capable of selectively switching between various personalities (Poster, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b), which have no common values or goals. In reality, online writing is only one way of expressing who we are, what we want, and what we believe. The survey participants saw this as true, and showed that they understood that online writing was something that was a permanent part of their "record," and that they were aware of others making judgments based on this record.

Despite calling for "professional" or "business" English to be the lingua Franca of the Internet, 28 participants said they gather their news and information about world cultures from online discussions. Evidently, the participants did not see the contradictory nature of their responses—on the one hand, they wanted to show that they were inclusive and interested in current political situation as well as show awareness of and sensitivity to global cultures. But on the other hand, they expected all of the information to be produced according to the standards perpetuated (Landow, 2006; Anzaldua, 1987; Loomba, 1998; Franklin, 2005) by the American educational and professional systems: linear thinking, concise expression, "proper" grammar, language

control, etc. The participant understanding of their Internet peers showed that the educational institutions they were a part of managed to imprint them with an ideology (Marx & Engels, 1973; Gramsci, 1988) that privileged a literacy that was aligned with the privileged language of the American academics or the business world (Banks, 2011; Morrell, 2008; Bourdieu, 1991; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001). The privileging lies in the exclusion of many local and regional dialects, grammars, and tones. In a sense, the English the participants called for was the white and institutionalized language that was often forced upon children in American schools (Darder & Uriarte, 2013). Additionally, even if the participants believed that the Internet was a space for all, they still think that non-Americans must carry the burden of adhering to the “proper” English: it is on them to ensure that the American readers would be satisfied with the clarity of language and simplicity of style. I found both of these scenarios provide a call to action for all educators interested in equity as more youth need to be educated about the issues of power in online spaces and in literacy practices (Morrell, 2008; Selfe and Selfe, 2011; Banks, 2011). So here, the “public” in public writing means that the public ought to adhere to the “proper” English if they hoped to be treated as equals in AODS.

Interview participants spoke about judging peers based on their level of linguistic proficiency. Oliver judged the information found online by the style of writing it was conveyed in. “Proper” English seemed to be the most believable language on the Internet for nearly all participants, and had become a hegemonic force for them (Gramsci, 1988). Even spaces dedicated to technical discussions were expected to feature this discourse (Gee, 2001). For instance, Sean described his impressions of the discourse practiced on the Microsoft Excel forums. Despite the international nature of the forum—where people from all over the world participated in posting and answering questions, Sean found that the only time he had trouble with understanding the language was

when the technological jargon was used. Here we saw another example of “proper” English hegemony (Gramsci, 1988) in AODS. Like survey participants, Sean was remarking on the overwhelming presence of English, but unlike the survey participants, he did not take the step to criticize others in their usage of English. Interestingly, the presence of jargon was another language in and of itself. Technology has its own words and meanings, and a non-peer must translate and comprehend those terms if she hopes to interact with the technology in a logical way. This is interesting as the medium is not only the message (McLuhan, 2001), but it is also has a language and thus a culture of its own (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; McLuhan, 2001; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Poster, 2013).

I was fascinated with the possibility of a connection between online contexts and the rhetorical choices peers made as a result of possessing a certain understanding of these contexts and audiences (McLuhan, 2001; Ito et. al., 2013; Selfe & Selfe 2011; Landow, 2006; Loomba, 1998; Franklin, 2005; Kress, 2003). As a result of this understanding, participants named the following rhetorical choices as key to success in AODS spaces: “be critical of the work not the person” and “Keep in mind that the intention is to share an opinion not start a fight or vent a personal grudge. If the opinion is negative then keep it relevant.” In these responses, the participants wanted to affirm that the tone and address had to fit into audience expectations as well as forum participation perimeters. To this end, participants advised to remain personally disengaged and to respond to the material and not the peer at hand. Here, the participants were expressing a need to be “steeled” for the electronic contact zones (Selfe & Selfe, 2011) which are still dominated by architectures and designs that replicate the rigid, white, and English-dominated spaces of computers and smart phones (Landow, 2006; Selfe & Selfe, 2011). Additionally, the advice here

seeks to affirm that the audience receiving the writing might not be singular in their ideas, but might include individuals with various positionalities (Loomba, 1998)

Audiences

Producing public writing in AODS meant that the lack of stability in the discourse communities presented an ongoing conundrum about who the audience might include. Writing to an online audience meant that participants had to be concerned not only with not fitting in, but also be trolled. Worse it seemed, missing the audience expectations might result in being ignored. Writers of discussion posts and reviews were preoccupied with one thing: being read. Inherently, the participants showed that the goal of writing online was to become visible. The rhetorical choices online writers made, it seems, were closely aligned with the goal of reaching as many online readers as possible. I wondered, how much writers sacrificed towards this end—how much are writers intent on adhering to the rules in the name of, well, making a name for themselves? How much genuine originality, personal voice, and interest was lost for these writers may be immeasurable. But what can be observed was another parallel with academic writing: in order to be heard and valued, writers must adhere to the norms and ideas proscribed by the institutions. In-adherence could result in penalties, or worse still, in being ignored. Besides issues with envisioning audiences, survey participants wanted to highlight stylistic choices that could facilitate readability for peers. When discussing ways of composing online, 33 participants discussed specific tone, wording, level of disclosure, level of veracity, and other aspects of etiquette they valued as crucial. One participant said that

Writers of comments and reviews should keep in mind that others will use their opinion when it comes to making a decision. Therefore it is a responsibility of a

writer of comments and reviews to be fair and provide accurate information while straying away from personal biases.

This response tackled quite a few issues, and audience awareness was at the forefront. This participant demonstrated that writing in online forums is a social act (Heath Brice, 2001; Street, 2003) intended to produce public writing (Alvernamm, 2008; Gee, 2007; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009). As such, online writing could be read by a variety of people, or by no one at all. Participants' responses seemed to suggest that it might be most useful to assume a broad audience for any online post, and assume that the online writer had some sort of impact on peers. Liverow (2001, 2006) pointed out that using the Internet positioned peers in a space that was uneven because of access and capacity issues, or a world where plural subjectivities clashed (Loomba, 1998; Landow, 2006; Nakamura, 2008). As the participant put it: online writers had a responsibility to the readers, and one of those responsibilities was honoring the trust that could develop between writers and readers.

Although writing in online spaces does not guarantee an audience response (Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Marshall, 2007;), writing a few posts would more than likely result in a stranger commenting. Peers may not pay mind to who they are going to encounter in online spaces, but being aware of audience wants, needs, likes, and dislikes (Lievrouw, 2001, 2006; Hall, 2012; Ito, 2013; Lewis & Fabos, 2005) was an issue that emerged in all of the interviews conducted. In short, online writers produced content that a specific audience received. The more aware of this fact a writer was, the more successful she was in crafting writing that was consistent with audience expectations. To this end, making general inferences about audience expectations is a necessary process.

For Michael, developing audience awareness came with time and reflection:

[developing audience awareness] had an adverse effect on my usage because I no longer see a point in going on there and trying to establish my credibility (...) now I feel like we all have different opinions and people have their different experiences and we will never see eye to eye.

Michael believed that the trolls he saw online recently were most likely very young, or at least younger than he. Developing this attitude allowed Michael not to take anything he saw online personally. Interestingly, the more confident Michael felt, the less aggressive his online behavior, and the more sparse his online participation had become. Michael reduced his online participation and did not want to engage in much back-and-forth debating. He no longer felt that he needed to justify each of his opinions, and therefore, did not feel that he needed to return to each post he was making. So, the lessened participation was not motivated by Michael not valuing online discussions any more, but by his acceptance of polyvocality (Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Poster, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b) and developing appreciation for plurality of opinions. Coupled with his developing confidence, Michael began to welcome and value the opinions of others, and in the process, became less interested in the combative arguing he once engaged in (Ito, 2013; Davies, 2008).

Sometimes, the audience encountered in online spaces turns into a nest of trolls for a variety of reasons. Being a target of trolling elicited a very peculiar reaction from Daniel: he was motivated to be a more careful writer. Daniel described being trolled in the past for his grammar and spelling mistakes. As a first generation student who was not confident in his English usage, Daniel took the trolling as motivation to be a more careful online composer. Using a dictionary to spell check became a major part of Daniel's online composing process. The public aspect of writing in spaces like YouTube impacted Daniel greatly. He has not learned about process

writing in school, but he has learned many process-writing skills through his YouTube discussions. Daniel is an example of a peer treated as a subaltern in online spaces. His imperfect language gave ammunition to trolls for whom the Internet is white and English-speaking. For these supremacists, the presence of a peer like Daniel is an opportunity to exercise trolling and to give way to violence. Daniel's experience is by no means unique, as even Robert discussed pursuing linguistic imperfections as a means of "punishing" peers he disagreed with. The issues of colonial domination in online spaces are on display in these answers and produced a reality where Daniel felt pressured to conform and derived pleasure from that conformity. The colonial domination of English on the Internet has already produced a hegemonic situation where the prevalence of English is inherent to many peers—even ones who used the medium to achieve self-liberation. Peers need to be educated about these issues so that linguistic plurality, and cultural plurality by extension, become the expected norm as opposed to an afterthought in online spaces.

Despite feeling the need to conform to the hegemonic and colonial norms of Internet discourses, Daniel believed that he derived material benefits from participating in online discussions. Daniel described the process of becoming a self-aware writer through his YouTube and tumblr participation. Since his major did not demand many classes that put stress on writing, Daniel chose the two spaces for writing and feedback:

Recently I found it that people find it (...) interesting when I write in English and then I'll drop one letter in Spanish that everybody knows and they'll be like 'oh my god this is great!' Twitter is great for that. Yesterday I wrote 'I am missing' something about—I was supposed to write "my" but instead I wrote 'es' so I was supposed to be 'I am missing my jelly beans' or something like that and then I put "I

am missing es jelly beans” and then people loved it so I was like ‘all right people like this!

Daniel became aware of the positive attitude towards Spanish in his posts only about a week prior to the interview. The shift in online trends often happened quickly, and lasted for a very short time (Coiro et. al., 2014). Daniel was excited to see that his Spanish injection was appreciated, and that boost of support from the community gave him greater self-esteem. The enthusiastic reception showed Daniel that he could navigate the online space and play with the languages he had at his disposal. He could chose who he was and how he wrote (Anzaldua, 1987; Darder & Uriarte, 2013). Here, audience expectations led to the backwards process of persona exploration. Initially, Daniel’s online persona was intent on keeping his Spanish skills out of his writing. Yet, through his public writing and audience interaction, he received encouragement to open up to the online audiences more.

But what was at the heart of the audience whims? It may be impossible to get to the very core of this question, but there might be some possible variants that contributed to the rising and falling trends online: time of day, day of week/month/year all played a part in who was active online and who was not. Specific regions, or time zones, could be active at various times due to even more assorted and complex variables. As Robert discussed, the online spaces that were open 24/7 attracted visitors from across the world, and each time zone became active at different points in the day. Thus, the reception of Daniel’s writing was impacted by who could see his writing and when. These were only some of the variables—not to mention the individual moods that each online peer experienced, or even the weather that could interfere with Internet service or even a peer’s wellbeing. Finally, it was impossible to predict what might become popular online or even for how long (Coiro et. al., 2014; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Hall, 2012; Lievrouw,

2002, 2006;). As Daniel noted, online trends were notoriously fast-paced and what was “hot” today will be passé tomorrow.

Communicating with companies. AODS create communicative spaces for various audiences, some of which were unexpected. In addition to peers, AODS audiences included corporations, small proprietors, colleges, and governments. As with peer audiences, the non-peers had differing agendas and wanted to read participants’ writing for differing reasons. Although Susan did not always receive feedback on her reviews from other peers, she received feedback from the retailers or product manufacturers she reviewed. Susan felt that companies were more responsive to reviews than other peers because company success depended on customer satisfaction. The attention she received was not an act of kindness or community, but a way to market to customers of the Millennial generation. As Susan put it, companies have “caught on” that Millennials reviewed extensively, and many businesses were invested in reading and responding to customers.

Oliver also experienced connecting with companies through Yelp, but unlike Susan, Oliver’s experience were mixed. On the one hand, he had positive interactions with restaurants and service providers. On the other hand, his interaction with Spirit Airlines was shocking. Spirit was infamous for poor customer relations: you go into their reviews and it says ‘Don’t fly Spirit!’ ‘Don’t fly Spirit!’ “ Don’t fly Spirit!” ‘Don’t fly Spirit!’ And I flew Spirit. And then I was one of those people.” Not only was the experience of flying Spirit awful for Oliver, he then observed Spirit retaliate and attack customers who wrote negative reviews about them.

Oliver’s description of what his feelings were like about the retaliation was a sad reality check for me:

At least they're honest. They don't guarantee a good time and people complain about them. It's the fact that the cost seems like the lower fair out there (...) I think they don't care. It's about access. People with less money don't have access to all the other nicer airlines.

Here the class and cost issue emerged and showed how devastating preying on the poor was. The warning present online for potential customers was there, yet because of issues of access, the poor's voicing of opinions may not have had any effect (Gramsci, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991; Landow, 2006)—the airline was unwilling to change their practices, and the poor did not have the ability to pay more money for better service.

Literacy gathering processes

Being aware of audiences as online writers was merely half of the audience equation: participants were themselves an audience whenever they used AODS to gather information. As with the audiences encountered in AODS, once participants were themselves an audience, their practices differed (See Figure 22).

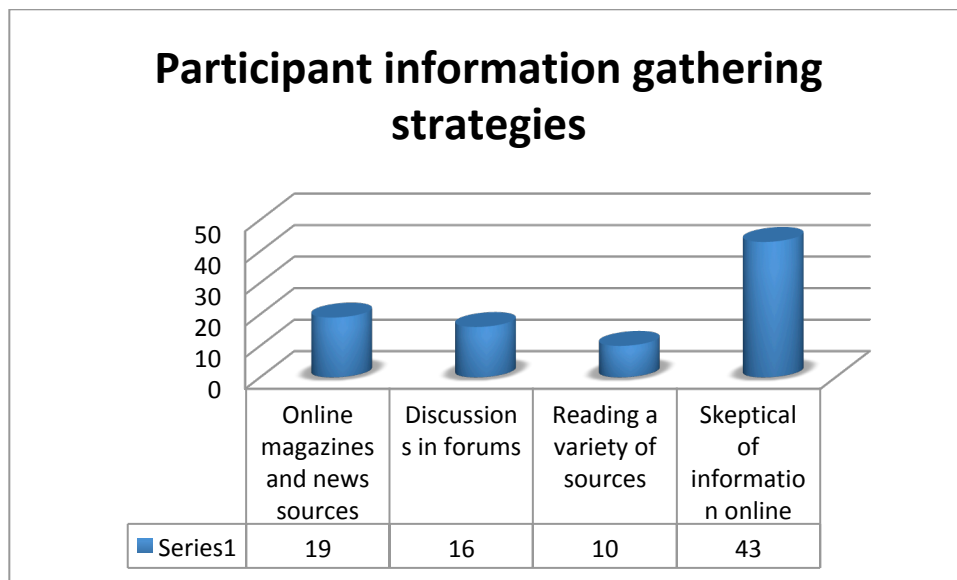


Figure 22: Participant information gathering strategies

As shown by Figure 22, when it came to gathering information and believing sources, participants divided into 3 distinct processes:

- 19, named going directly to online magazines and newspapers as a way to gain knowledge,
- 16 said they gathered information from online discussions in forums,
- 10, specified that reading a single source online was not a sufficient source of information as confirmation of opinions and gathering information was a secondary step required.

The first set of responses demonstrated a sophisticated and dedicated audience that had developed a trust towards a certain set of publications and followed them on an ongoing basis. It seemed that reading single author content was a preferred mode of gaining access to information, however, these same participants discussed reading news sources as reputable, and other sources as needing confirmation.

The second set of responses pointed to a more discussion-based model of gathering information where the participants wanted to engage with both reading a piece of news that was followed up with a discussion with other peers online. This set of participants seemed more inclined to read and process information discursively, or at least to gather more input/analysis from other peers through reading their opinions.

The final set of responses engages a third component: further research via other online spaces. As one participant put it: “If I learn something in comments I tend to do more research myself. [Online participation] taught me not to believe everything you read.” Here, skepticism towards information, at least in the online context, was a prevailing sentiment as 43 participants share this

view. For these participants, the initial step of finding information online is only a gateway to further research.

Critical Reading

Developing careful reading habits in online spaces helped participants build critical reading skills. By critical, I refer to questioning content, looking up alternative interpretations, checking the sourcing of information, and other skills that prevented participants from being passive recipients of information. 61 participants were inclined not to believe what was published online unless they discovered a consensus among many sources, peer opinions, or both. This set of participants demonstrates not merely skepticism, but also critical reading skills—questioning authors and opinions was one of the strongest skills that any reader could gain and apply in a variety of settings, including education and the professional world (Scrivener & Cole, 1978).

The participants said credibility stemmed from the platform or the discussion topic—both contexts for the broader issue of believability. 29 participants pointed out that they were more likely to trust reviews because of the inherent nature of reviews, or their understanding of the genre of review (Yancey, 2011; Ito et. al., 2013). As one participant said “Reviews are experiences you had with the product and I doubt someone would be bored enough to write a fake review on a product” pointing out that a false review was necessarily written intentionally as such. Here, the participant was pointing out the unique nature of review-writing as opposed to other types of writing online: as opposed to opinions and arguments, reviews cannot be wrong unless the writer made a decision to lie. In other types of writing, writers could be wrong because of a myriad of reasons ranging from lack of knowledge all the way to malice. However, if a review was written and lies appeared, that was a direct decision by the writer to embellish their experience. Participants discussed this issue when examining reviews for hire, or reviews that

were written by peers who were compensated. The reviews for hire added to a context where not all experiences could be believed, and skepticism was a critical reading strategy. Reviews for hire became myths (Barthes, 1972) in that they perverted both the nature of reviewing and the communal aspect of support. No wonder the participants expressed outrage and anger at reviews for hire: reviews for hire were propaganda and advertising that invaded communal spaces on the Internet.

In a sense, review readers used critical reading skills in establishing both the value of a product or service, and the merit of the review set. As one participant described it: “The quantity of people reviewing is also important. the more something is reviewed you as a consumer can make a general consensus.” Another participant said that “It's a way for customers to tell their opinion about the product they purchased and for other customers to see what other people have to say about the product (or company) from personal experience. Gives credibility.” These two responses demonstrated a more communal approach to reviews. Both participants highlighted the need to critically read through review sets, not merely through one reviews. The credibility that emerged was accomplished through finding consensus as well as reading the personal experiences writers shared.

For some participants, like Oliver, developing critical reading skills helped to establish what was and what was not credible: “Oftentimes when people are very credible they will speak in a language that is very understandable. And the frequency of that person providing information.” Oliver described a particular stylistic flow that was “uninterrupted by ‘likes’ and ‘ums’ and ‘maybes’” as clear and easily understood. Oliver then contrasted the “easily understandable” writing with how he perceived biased, or fallacious writing:

some people are very matter of fact and for some reason they speak as though they have a lot of clout and experience and that they are experienced in what they are talking about. And then they are people who talk about their feelings and the people that talk in particular about their feelings of anger or dissatisfaction. Those would be the two polarized groups.

Oliver parsed out the skills of a writer who spoke from a position of confidence and information as opposed to “hubris.” For Oliver, the “anything-goes” style that was sometimes present in online writing (Davies, 2008) was a sign of deficiencies in thinking, reasoning, or information. The style and content of the writing were conflated as necessarily related and demonstrative. Oliver’s critical reading skills have lead him to believe that “proper” English is a marker of truth and strong information. Oliver was deploying the syntax/grammar level of judgment without following the other steps to fact check information.

Justin showed how problematic development of critical reading skills was with no guidance in online spaces (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann, 2008, 2010; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b). When asked how he establishes whether a source was or was not credible, he said:

I look for back-up. If multiple people are putting the same thing, that to me is back up. Obviously multiple people are having the same problem. (...) on social media it’s who you trust more. If my mom is putting something I trust more what she’s saying than a random friend of a friend of a friend who pops up on your Facebook feed that puts something.

His critique also pointed to the lack of training for online peers, who were left to their own devices to develop ways to judge who/what to believed. To contrast the uncertainty of reading in

online spaces, Justin pointed to the extensive training provided in academia as far as determining and judging academic content:

It's rough! Cuz if you're doing academic work you can tell right away: there's titles, or what website they are coming from or who it is. Any .gov is probably not going to tell you wrong information, so a lot of it is name-based and dropping what's there, the affiliation it's with.

Through his responses, it was clear that Justin transferred some of the skills from academic learning to online spaces: the mere fact that he was discerning about what to believe online and how to find confirmation for information was proof that he had been educated about the value of vetting sources. Justin named several markers of what made a source credible, and these were typically used in the academic setting—something that Justin noted may be absent in the online environment. More importantly, Justin pointed out that even if the academically valued markers of trustworthiness were present in online environments, they may be little or no help in the process of evaluating electronic sources and spaces. Although Justin was transferring some skills from his academic experiences, it was a limited transfer since the form and content of online matter varies starkly from what academia produces.

Not-so-critical Reading. Like Sami, Tom pointed out that Internet peers may not be conscientious readers and sometimes jumped to conclusions. I called that “jumping the shark” as it is akin to the situation Tom described:

One of my favorite sites is called Cracked.com and it's mostly comedy articles, and it's so hilarious. But at the same time they are so aware—because they have a comments section—that they always say ‘I know that you are writing in the comments right now. Stop and let me finish my thing’ I agree with that! Because

most people, before they even get to a point, they already have an opinion on it and it's like, that's what I think the problem is. People are expected to have an opinion immediately and not hear the whole story. Like they are very reactionary, and they hear buzz words and they go and do a thing.

Jumping the Shark in online forums leads to the inevitable misunderstanding of the original post, and even confrontations. Tom noted that this was a result of inattention and of poor reading skills practiced by many Internet peers. This should not be surprising in light of the survey results that showed 47 participants relied on skimming as a reading strategy online. Other interview participants, like Susan and Rose, both discussed being less attentive when reading content in online spaces as well. Simultaneously, many peers were quick to express an opinion and were not patient enough to first understand the full point the original poster was trying to make.

Sami was fond of Reddit and used many reading strategies that frustrated him on Linked In: he skimmed, avoided posts with much text, and generally stuck to posts with mostly images: "A lot of people post, and they are really really long posts. It's not like a 3 sentence post. People take time to write, and I just don't want to spend time to read." The context of using Reddit was different for Sami than that of Linked-In. Reddit was about fun, relaxation, and taking a break. Here, Sami was comfortable with silly and incomplete thoughts, reading without commenting, or commenting with jokes. In these rare moments, Sami used the Internet for all of the possibilities he generally saw little value in. As someone who was busy going to school and running a relatively large company, Sami's fondness for Reddit showed that checking out the front page was more than just relaxation—it fulfilled a curiosity about what was popular online and what the online peer group was talking about (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Alvermann, 2010; Marshall, 2007; Kahn & Kellner, 2005).

In addition to a complex way of approaching online participation, participants showed here that they engaged in enough praxis to understand how information functions. Being a reflexive user of information showed that participants moved beyond the false promise of liberation through access. In fact, participants showed how false that promise is—as any access to literacy is not a guarantee of liberation, neither is access to the Internet. Participants were aware that many online sources included misinformation, and they developed means of safeguarding against being prey to such practices as spreading of fake news. Educators, parents, and policymakers must take up the issues of information literacy as an urgent matter. The 2016 election meddling is in part the result of poor education of the public and previous generations of online users. Clearly, spreading fake news and misinformation would not be possible in a space where online users were taught to complete a fair amount of reading about any bit of information they discover online. Though it may seem that the youth already know about these issues based on this research, it is in fact more dire to heighten the level of education around these issues as meddlers and trolls will only get more clever and even experienced peers might be vulnerable to various attacks and attempts.

Academic literacies. In addition to critical reading skills, 15 survey participants discussed engaging with online spaces that explicitly centered on skills that are taught in schools: “Usually, I enjoy topics analyzing a story, its structure, meaning, and storytelling techniques.” This participant demonstrated liking to pursue web content that discussed composition and literary analysis skills. In addition to these sophisticated skills, participants named a long list of literacies gained (see Figure 23).

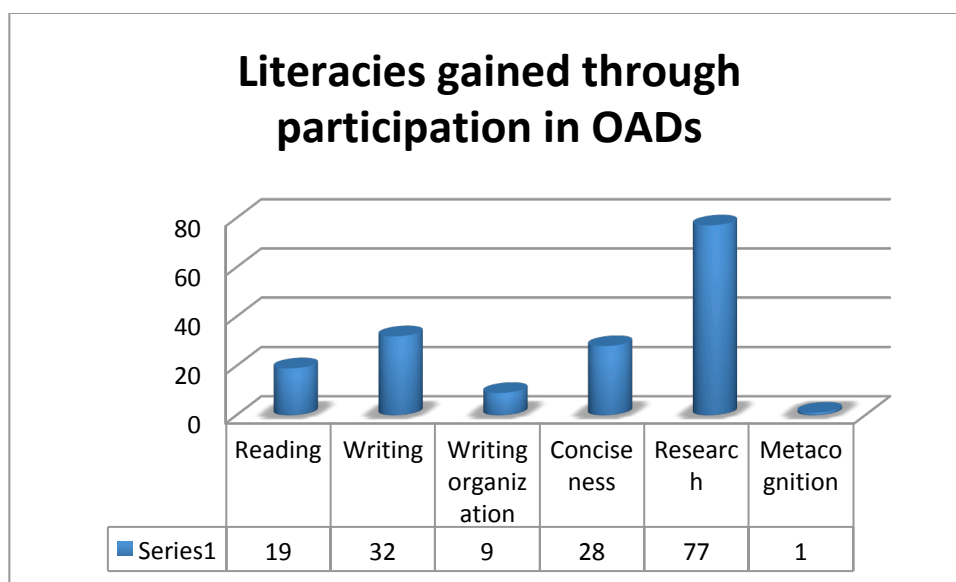


Figure 23: Literacies gained through participation in AODS

As shown by Figure 23, survey participants learned a variety of skills through online discussion participation. Most notably, one participant said they learned “Toleration Thoroughness (like reading many Amazon reviews instead of the first good one).” This last response showed an attempt to theorize and explain a phenomenon that the participant observed about their own participation—a way to explicate implicit knowledge, or metacognition.

49 participants spoke about their own writing skills in a derogatory fashion: “I consider myself a terrible writer” or a sentiments analogous to it peppered the survey responses. What most participants, 32, followed such pronouncements with “so [participating in online discussions and online reviews] gives me good practice” and “given me a slight confidence boost in my writing skills.” Like the more general communication skills discussed previously, online forums and reviews provided peers with a real-life application and utilization of previously theoretical skills. In essence, the writing being taught in school may often be too disconnected with real-world contexts for students and is often too high pressure, too structured, and too unnatural to allow for experimentation and comfort. Additionally, As a secondary discourse (Gee, 2007), academic

writing often unsettled students' previously gained ideas about writing and caused confusion, and even conflict, with the other discourses in the students' lives.

Sadly, few educational settings welcome a genuine process of experimentation (Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001; McLuhan, 1994; Spivak, 1990). In my estimation, school was where most students learn to self-stigmatize as "bad writers" and find difficulty with performing writing as it is expected by the instructors and institutions that judge them (Bourdieu, 1991; McLuhan, 2001; Darder & Uriarte, 2013; Spivak, 1990). But outside of the educational bubble, the world of online comments and reviews was far more flexible and open to the type of practice that many self-stigmatized students might benefit from (Vasudevan, 2006; Buckingham, 2003; Davies, 2008). In other words, the social process of reading and writing online is chock full of opportunities for play (Vygotsky, 1978; Vasudevan, 2006), and to do so with and against others (Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001). As the participants in this study showed, reading and writing online reviews and discussions could help in building specific writing skills that are highly valued by academic settings: conciseness, clarity, organization, argumentation. As 37 of participants note, their online participation helped their school performance.

Unsurprisingly, all participants pointed out that all types of Internet spaces played a major part in their education. Justin pointed out that he "ha[sn't] had a class that doesn't use the Internet (...) even high school it was a huge part." Justin named activities, such as research, as a major task he used Internet spaces for. Interestingly, the research specified was not merely academic, but also professional in nature as "researching colleges" was one of the major activities Justin's high school teachers assigned. Justin was not an enthusiastic user of the Internet in his schooling, and lamented the processes of discovery as "lost" because of the way research was done in electronic spaces.

Oliver shares Justin's opinions about the role of the Internet in education.

I had to humble myself and say 'I'm not gonna pass college if I don't learn technology. SO I had to learn the computer (...) but there is a huge disadvantage (...) the technology has been around since I was in high school, but I was too poor to have it.

Oliver was a veteran and a non-traditional student. He had neither grown up with the Internet, nor was he an early adopter. In fact, technology in general, and the Internet in particular, remained challenges for him in both his educational pursuits as well as in his private life.

Unlike Justin and Oliver, John was more enthusiastic about using the Internet in his educational pursuits. John's attitude towards using the Internet for schooling showed a clear hierarchy about the spaces he considered credible and useful. School-connected spaces such as Blackboard, and library resources were ranked as highly appropriate, valuable and believable. But other online spaces were ranked as either study-aids, or completely useless to the process of learning. John said: "I don't use forums for school activities because they are mostly opinions. I've been taught over and over again to use concrete sources." Here we see a bias that was taught to John as well as other participants: the Internet was not a credible place at all whatsoever in terms of academics. The years of protectionist ideas (Postman, 1992; Debord, 1998, 2014; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012) were palpable here and it was undeniable that very little educating had been done to breach the dichotomy.

In addition, John discussed googling to find "reputable" sources and named spaces that were akin to being print-based.

At this point, anyone born in the 90s on, especially the late 90s, (...) you probably know how the Internet works since before you can remember anything. So, (...) I remember going to the library for computer day in elementary school and playing “where in the world is Carmen San Diego?” and learning how you do things using the Internet.

Many Millennials were still being taught print-based learning strategies (McLuhan, 1994; Kellner & Share, 2005; Ito, 2013; Morrell, 2008)—find articles that were “reputable” and stop there. Teachers would not mention comments sections or branching out of information threads.

Much like Michael and Justin, Susan felt a deep distrust towards online sources of information. In particular, her doubt in the veracity of *Wikipedia* showed a deep link to a cruel prank assignment a teacher played on Susan and her classmates when she was in middle school. The teacher explored the architecture of *Wikipedia* to convince students about the lack of veracity of information that existed online. Rather than show the possibility of aggregating collected human knowledge, discuss decentering of knowledge curating, or even the de-corporatization of encyclopedic practices, the teacher chose to present a false equivalency about *Wikipedia* and to present the deeply flawed protectionist ideal that casted doubt on any online sources. Even as a college senior studying publishing, Susan was taught that *Wikipedia* was less accurate than *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

In publishing, we were talking about how *Wikipedia* replaced *Britannica* and that was really fascinating how you go from this one extremely credible, giant book with a million volumes to this thing online that anyone can attribute to. I think it’s pretty sad honestly.

In reality, several studies demonstrated that *Wikipedia* has a smaller number of errors than *Britannica*, largely due to the large-scale community policing activities that quality control and fact check *Wikipedia* on ongoing basis (Staub, & Hodel, 2016). I was not surprised that Susan was learning to mistrust *Wikipedia* in her publishing courses. After all, *Wikipedia* is a free resource, and it put *Britannica* and other encyclopedias out of business. It was therefore not surprising that an industry that lost revenue was not able to understand or interested in teaching the next generation of professionals about the competition (Postman, 1992). There was another side to this issue: the resistance of the older generations to share power with youth who were more tech savvy and more comfortable in the Internet environments (Ito, 2013; Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Yancey, 2011; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

Despite many participants' inability to engage AODS in their education, some participants shared incredible stories of how AODS assisted them in the process of intellectual identity formation. Michael identified numerous academic skills that he learned through participating in online forums: structuring essays, debating, and logic. Michael pointed out that "[online discussions] made me into a better debater because I learned how to back my things up and structure arguments which is weird that I couldn't really form that in school – I had to learn how to do it on the Internet." In addition, Michael learned how to analyze the structure and function of writing from reading various online forums (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Yancey, 2011; Davies, 2008). To this extent, Michael learned how to use references in a specific context, how to select most effective argumentation in a given context, and how to appeal to a specific audience (Hall, 2012). Most importantly, Michael connected the act of writing and discussion with fun (Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009) since the contexts and content of his online participation involved a community of practice that shared his interests and passions:

I learned how to debate from YouTube. The debating really came from YouTube but the actual writing and the actual articulation of things definitely came from the forums. I feel that people on forums are, I don't want to say smarter, but (...) I feel like they are more intellectually forward. Or, I guess they are those people, those socially awkward people who, I consider myself one of those socially awkward people that has a nice bit of intelligence. But they would write these super long, structured, and use words I have never seen before, I would have to google them – like what am I supposed to say to this? I don't even know what this means. That definitely helped me improve my standing as a writer and as an intellectual overall. Just from reading people's posts.

Because of his belonging to these communities, Michael developed a sense of who he was as a whole person: socially awkward, but highly intelligent. That was also how he understood the other participants in the online forums (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b).

In addition to learning meta-knowledge about writing, Michael was able to learn specific concepts through online participation. Here, YouTube emerged as an important tool to supplement classroom learning (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Alvermann, 2010; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Vygotsky, 1978). Michael was not the only participant to point out how crucial YouTube was to learning math as Daniel, John, and Susan all discussed using YouTube for math classes. But in addition to math, Michael was able to learn about psychology—his major—from videos posted. He then supplemented watching videos with interacting with other peers in the comments section. Michael showed a multi-layered process of learning (Vasudevan, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) that relied on multimodality (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007; McLuhan, 1994). Although YouTube was

described as volatile and full of trolls, it was simultaneously described as an effective space for asking questions and learning from other peers.

What is crucial was Michael's comment about poor instruction and the fall-out for students. The complaint that math professors cannot teach, or that college professors in general are poor at teaching, was not a new one. 49 survey and 9 interview participants point out that they have trouble understanding classroom teaching, and that they needed to work with online resources to supplement classroom learning, fill in knowledge gaps, or repeat the information. Here, we saw that AODS emerged as a space where a variety of learning styles, speeds, and preferences were accommodated (Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Marshall, 2007; Ito, 2013; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). I think this was the crucial point of my work: not everyone flourishes in classroom settings, and structured education often presented major challenges to non-traditional learners (Darder & Uriarte, 2013; Spivak, 1990; Fraire, 1996; Bourdieu, 1991). Participants like Michael were over-all successful at schooling, but even those successful students found a need for supplementing the instruction. Other participants, like Ian, struggled with schooling, and for them, the Internet became a relatively exclusive space for learning.

Unlike many participants, his high school and college teachers directed Daniel towards online resources:

Mostly it was words I was looking for so it was dictionary.com but if it was math problems or science that's when the YouTube guy—the 'khan academy' guy that's when I figured it out. It was actually a teacher that pushed me into that.

The Internet, particularly YouTube, was suggested as an acceptable means for increasing school success and getting Daniel's grades to improve. By showing Daniel that YouTube could help with schooling, the teachers legitimized Internet spaces and became positive sponsors of

Daniel's online literacy (Brandt, 1998). Despite showing Daniel the videos, the teachers did not show him the accompanying discussion—a feature that Daniele discovered on his own and learned how to navigate independent of any teacher's (Banks, 2011, Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013) influence or assistance.

I always had trouble in school so I had to figure things out on my own. My dad couldn't really help m—he was like 'nah you'll have to figure it out' so I was like 'all right' he would always be like 'go ask somebody who knows.' So instead of asking someone, cuz generally I am someone who is very shy, but I'd go online and I could just type the word and it just comes up and I understand.

Daniel reached the threshold of participation relatively early and became a regular contributor to the YouTube comments sections. In addition to using YouTube as a study aid, Daniel was exposed to the platform in the process of completing a class-based project. This project enabled Daniel to experience the technical aspects of producing YouTube content. However, because the assignment featured few reflective or critical parts, Daniel felt that it was a confusing and pointless bit of busy work that banked on getting students to be interested solely based on the usage of YouTube (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Yancey, 2011; McLuhan, 1994; Morrell, 2008).

Professional

Knowledge building and formation through participation in online forums and reviews was not limited to schooling—learning about and towards professional endeavors figured just as prominently for the participants. 65 survey participants discussed using online forums specifically for work purposes. As one participant said: “I am an active online participant. I am a communication studies major and I would like to work in a media based industry so I need to be

knowledgeable of different media based platforms.” Online participation was no longer an option for many students: it was the bulk of what their professional lives will encompass. Further, in today’s world, college students are not permitted to be just that. To the contrary, college students are getting pulled in many directions, which seems to be increasingly dragging them away from the classroom (see Figure 24).



Figure 24: Survey participant professional commitments

Figure 24 shows that 12 survey participants have a part-time job, 28 work full time, 19 hold internships, and 11 both work and have an internship. Only 14 participants neither worked nor had an internship. The growing pressure to have work and internship experience before graduating college was causing students to join the work force often before learning needed skills to perform the job they were hired for as demonstrated by Sean’s experience.

In addition, today’s colleges are often unable to prepare students for certain aspects of the work force—working with highly sophisticated computer programs (like Adobe Photoshop, or even Microsoft Excel) is often a must, yet few classes are offered on these topics in the course of core curriculum. Students are infantilized and under-served by higher educational insinuations

(McLuhan, 2001) and are stripped of knowledge that can be turned into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). For students entering jobs requiring at least a basic knowledge of these programs, online forums provide a needed level of assistance. 25 participants discussed using discussion boards in the process of filling in knowledge and skill gaps for work purposes. Interestingly, 34 participants described the process of participating in online discussions to support others who are in need of building skills. Tom described his robust participation in video editing discussion boards where he exclusively focuses on providing help to other video editors. Online spaces are then vehicles for demystifying much of the information that workers desperately need to be successful in the workforce (Benjamin, 2008), and because of the nature of the medium, this knowledge can be gained on the worker's terms (Franklin, 2005; Landow, 2006; Benjamin, 2008).

Filling in knowledge gaps. One of the major points of interest that I set out to investigate was the question of how do college students today use the Internet to learn on their own. I expected some of the information to be simple, some to be complex. But I did not expect my participants to name such a breadth of knowledge gaps between what they were learning in school and what they needed to know in the professional, and social world. It seemed that, with each interview, I got more and more information about what my participants did not, but should have, learned in school in order to be successful in their budding careers. The one commonality between the participants was that for every knowledge gap, there was at least one online space that could assist them.

As a business student, Daniel did not spend a lot of time learning writing composition—though he mastered some writing processes through YouTube, he was still not confident in his writing abilities. However, Daniel learned to recognize the weaknesses of his writing, and as such,

possessed the ability to criticize his own work. One of the areas of concern Daniel named was writing fast and posting without revision.

But my problem now is that I'll write too fast and then I'll miss something (...) because I speak Spanish I mostly speak in Spanish (...) so when I'm writing sometimes, I'll start writing in Spanish. Then I'll have to be like 'no I can't write this' nobody's gonna understand—even when I'm writing papers I'll write in Spanish it just comes out that way. It becomes a problem for me—I've been trying to—not change, but adapt to it and make sure I know what's going on.

In this process, Daniel often code-switches to Spanish. Unlike social media (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), the AODS were not limited by a sole network center, and the whole world had the potential to see the post (Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006). Daniel took the challenge of writing to a global audience and pressured himself to write in “correct” English. The omnipresence of English showed that even the peers with second language skills may feel pressured to write with the English speakers in mind (Selfe & Selfe, 2011). But another aspect of Daniel's participation was his understanding of the demands of the academic and professional setting—those spaces were dominated by formulaic and “proper” English. Rather than reject that reality, Daniel wanted to master that language and be successful so that he could benefit personally (Marx & Engels, 1973; Gramsci, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991; McLuhan, 1994).

Some of the skills Sean was learning online were not only technical—they were powerful habits that Sean had to develop in order to maintain his high rate of success. Through participating in the Microsoft Excel forum, Sean was forced to learn how to incorporate a plethora of additional skills, reference materials, and languages into his work. To start, Sean had to learn the programming language C++, something he had not studied in school, but is widely used on the

Microsoft Excel forum. Sean had to find and research several additional spaces where other peers provided guidance and explanation of C++ and its connection with Microsoft Excel. Thus, the communal process of knowledge sharing was benefitting Sean in a direct way.

Sean was not the only interview participant who felt that his college education had not been useful in his professional career. Sami shared Sean's feelings:

Nothing I learned in school is applicable in my work. (...) A lot of the classes I take, (...) have to sit there and listen to professors who are 'experts' (Sami's emphasis) but the problem is that they are teaching from a position of theory. They are not teaching from a position of operational reality, (...). Yeah I follow [blogs of] people who are "successful" (Sami's emphasis) because it is interesting to see, but you know it's just so different from the professors.

Sami raised an interesting point about theoretical and applied knowledge: should colleges hire instructors who are only strong in the theoretical part of their field? This question had a very straightforward answer for Sami: no. In his experience, college did provided him with education that matched the expectations of the real-world business (McLuhan, 1994; Yancey, 2011; Morrell, 2008), or the "operational reality." If colleges do not preparing students for their future jobs, then students will have to undertake supplemental education on their own (Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2005; Morrell, 2008, Yancey, 2011; Jenkins, 2008, 2009).

I am not sure whether it is possible to have educational programs that accurately prepare anyone for the working world. But I know it is possible to teach students about the world of resources that they can access and use in their working life (Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). It is clear that Sami was neither well prepared through the classes he took nor was he told about resources that could help him in the

work-force. Sami was in a unique position—as a young entrepreneur, he was able to find online resource long before he entered college, and he knew that what he was being taught at college was not adequate due to his vast “operational reality” experience.

Tom shared many of Sami’s ideas about the inefficiencies of college education and a love for personal education using online resources. Tom described his own lack of desire to present at conferences or write formal paper in favor of independent learning. He started to follow his own learning path in high school because he was bored with the material taught in classes. Tom was “disgusted” with how little was taught and took it upon himself to supplement his education with the use of the Internet (McLuhan, 1994; Bourdieu, 1991) Tom googled his interests and “fell in love with *Wikipedia*” which helped him love reading. Sadly, Tom felt that “god knows school didn’t want me to feel good about reading.” From the age of 16 Tom was “enthralled” with learning things online:

It’s disconcerting because when I went from high school to college, I thought ‘finally I can sit in class and talk to people and capitalize on the things I’ve earned and – not especially. And I don’t know if it’s the people in my program or the classes I’m taking but I can’t go to a single goddamned class without people referencing Beyoncé or Kanye West and it makes me want to jump off a cliff.

With each step in his education, Tom hoped that the intellectual level of his peers as well as the educational standards would rise higher, but so far he was disappointed. Like Ian, Tom was disappointed by schooling and felt left behind and underserved by the institutions and interactions with his peers in classes. For Ian, school was “boring as early as middle school” not only because of the low level of material taught, but also because of his inability to understand the rigid and artificial environment in classrooms. Ian felt stifled and angered by “teachers [who]

purported to be experts, [but] did not encourage critical thinking,” and pushed formulaic solutions and learning practices onto the students.

Both men were not intellectually stimulated by school. Both turned to the Internet to learn, but unlike Ian, Tom remained in school. Tom spoke with especially strong cynicism about schooling. He said that school “did not want him” to either learn or love to learn (Bourdieu, 1991; McLuhan, 1994). Even at the college level, both Tom and Ian found it difficult to work in the structured environment where most students were disengaged and instructors were unfamiliar with latest research. Most significantly, like Michael, both Ian and Tom struggled to find an intellectual connection with classmates who seemed to be, in Tom’s estimation, “preoccupied with popular culture and social media.” Tom was so disgusted with his peers that he abandoned any desire to pursue any further schooling.

Although many participants praised the Internet and its ability to educate, some participants focused on its ability to distract and un-teach. Sean expresses anxiety about “illegitimate” language infecting his “legitimate” language skills:

e-mail is part of our generation and the idea of online venues also is. (...) it allows you to (...) to write short, informal ways which then took you away from formal, legitimate ways of communicating with the public.

For Sean, “legitimate” meant accepted by academia and the business world. The language he believed is dominant was rooted in the values he observed in his schooling and internships (Bourdieu, 1991; Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001; Darder & Uriarte, 2013). He believed that the “traditional ways of communicating”—in person, verbally, and even in writing, needed to be measured, revised, and carefully fitting within the framework of the discourse community being produced. The culture Sean favored and stressed was white and middle-class. This was a deeply

conservative view, but also one that was produced by a person only beginning to enter the corporate world. Sean felt the pressure to fit his stereotypical view of a model employee, as evidenced by his ideas about e-mail:

There is an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about how when we send an e-mail, the concept of sending an e-mail is actual a marking stone to a Millennial just like taking the car for the first time. The idea is that you have to learn how to write in a, with some kind of room to scan your thoughts as opposed to short, critical texts. (...) The e-mail is part of our generation and the idea of online venues also is.

Instead of framing this moment as a cognitive event, with the potential to open up a conversation about contexts and literacies, Sean thinly veils his disdain for online spaces and frames e-mail as a potential gate-way to poor writing skills:

you have to read and write and speak in complete sentences, you have to be able to communicate in a way, and write in a way and speak in a way to clearly expresses your thoughts and being effective—if you believed in being effective which is at the forefront of specializing in something and making a living for yourself (...) away from the potential you could have had if you stayed away from those ideas

Sean used words such as “foreign” and “informal” to describe writing done electronically. Sean described writing done in an academic setting as “legitimate” and “effective” and “clear” as well as the only ways to become “specialized” and “making a living for yourself.” Sean described a dichotomy that was classically aligned with protectionist arguments against the usage of multimedia in the classroom. But to me, there was a note of anxiety and a fear of a form that could be predicted or controlled. After all, someone as comfortable with hierarchies as Sean might not value a setting where competition was not hinged on fulfilling requirements set forth

by a figure of authority. As Sean said, he saw electronic writing as devious and as a means of distracting writers from the “true” forms practiced in academic setting—what he is describing was a sabotaging agent that was designed to lead people into temptation and failure (Debord, 1998, 2014; Postman, 1992; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012). For Sean, AODS participation was a potential way to create more knowledge gaps in the area of writing.

Participants like Sami and Sean used the language of privilege to describe what they valued in online participation. In a large sense, this is ironic since both men came from families that immigrated to the United States and whose parents did not go to college in the U.S. Where, then, did this insistence on “purity” of online language come from? Perhaps the educational and professional endeavors of both men dictated their approach to what authority meant. Perhaps they were overcompensating as many children of immigrants do. In either case, both men showed a particular dislike of the kind of discourse that their own parents might produce in online spaces, and the kind of discourse that their family abroad might as well. In Sean’s case particularly, a number of family members did not speak English, so their participation in online discussions would have been rejected by his own standards. It is alarming that the two men seeking to succeed in the U.S. were also advocating for disempowering their own families in online spaces. It was clear that neither man engaged in understanding their beliefs on a deeper level—I did not think they understood the implications of their opinions, and it was evident they were not challenged to do so at any point. What they experienced was a world of values that stressed adherence to a certain style of English and so both men developed a value system connecting literacy, power, and authority. The two men showed that there is a profound need to engage peers and students in these kinds of discussions on an ongoing bases. Issues of context, genre, authority, and social justice are at stake here. If the subaltern are to speak, then the world

must be taught how to listen. Both of these men did not reach conscientização (Freire, 1996) through participation.

Social Literacies

In the previous section, I discussed the knowledge literacies that were produced in AODS. But those are not the only literacies that AODS helped develop for peers. AODS emerged as social spaces, and as such inevitably produce social literacies for peers. To beginner communicators, online environments may be simultaneously safe heavens, staging grounds, and testing labs (Vygotsky, 1978; Vasudevan, 2006) for new behaviors that are rooted in understanding how social exchanges work (Marshall, 2007; Morrell, 2008; Ito et. al., 2013; Coiro et. al., 2014; Jenkins 2008, 2009). However, it seems that online spaces are also playgrounds for those who harbor repressed violence, or at the very least, derision towards others (Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Landow, 2006). As one participant put it: “People have the potential to be irrationally hostile or inflammatory,” so all online participants should “be aware” and “beware.” It was a positive sign, I believed, that the survey participants were able to bring forth all of these nuances in their replies, as to me, it demonstrated a strong grasp on the medium and all of its intricacies, uses, and pitfalls.

Ethics

In previous sections, participants discussed many moments where they made decisions about AODS participation based on ethical considerations. In fact, all participants discussed ethics one way or another often without explicitly naming ethics in their responses. What became clear was the strengths of ethics that participants had developed for online participation—either through making rhetorical choices, policing communities, or being attentive to audiences, participants were not only aware of the impact of their writing on peers, but also advocated for personal

responsibility. Most notably, participants presented AODS participation as a way to care for others and less as acts of self-service.

Service to others. Surprisingly, product reviews emerged as spaces where participants highlighted their role in carrying for other peers. Both interview participants and survey participants described the reviewing in terms of helping others thus giving the review genre an agentive function. For participants, reviews functioned as a means of care for others through disclosure—a process of trust building that did not posit reciprocation, but rather appeared as a service of the owner to the potential buyer/subscriber. One survey participant defined reviews as “Gratification or warnings about a product or service to better advise disconnected users of the product or service” and another survey participant said: “They are from customers who have bought and used the product and want to relay their experiences to other consumers so that they can have an easier time deciding to buy the product.” In this way, reviews became a means of supporting others through the process of multi-media composition as many reviews rely on including images and/or hyperlinks.

Survey participants demonstrates an understanding and focus on the service aspect of reviewing. When asked to define what reviews were, survey participants included unexpected information about what they believed the function of reviews was, the role of reviewer, and what the benefits to both the reviewer and audience were (see Figure 24).

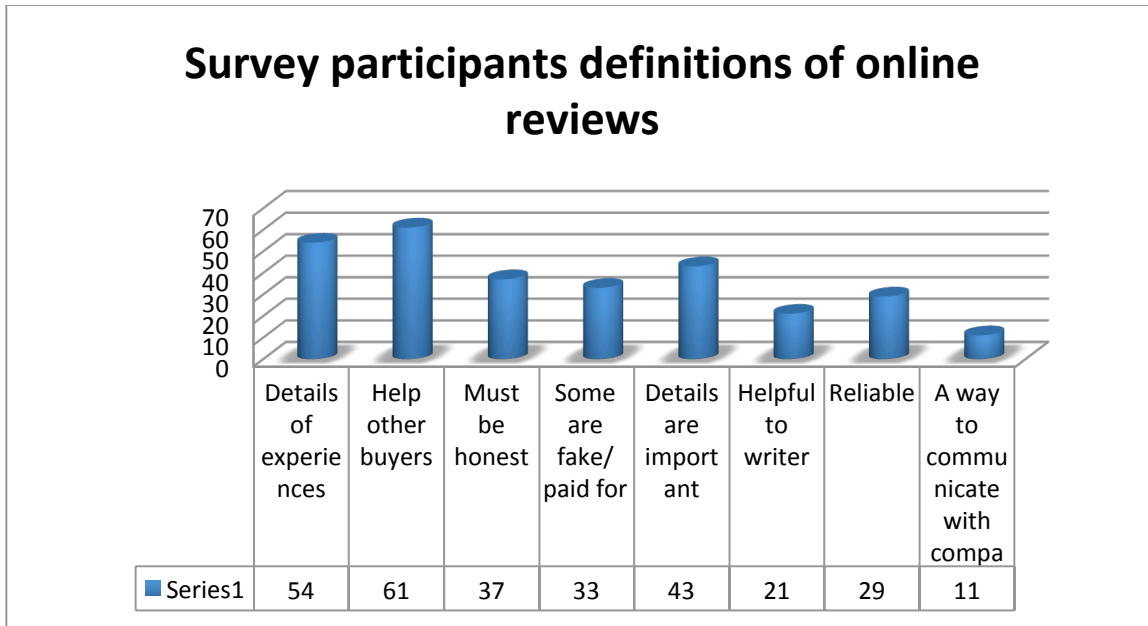


Figure 24: Survey participants definitions of online reviews

As demonstrated by Figure 24, 54 participants stressed that reviews detail experiences of the reviewer, and 61 said that reviews are a way to help potential buyers make buying decisions. The “help” was framed in the sense of making sure that the buyer was well informed about the product, did not waste money, and was making the best possible decision.

Ethical Reviewers take on the responsibility of sharing their experience as a way to tell others what to expect – for better or worse. For 43 survey participants, details were a crucial part of the review and needed to be included as a means of ensuring that bias was not seeping into the review. The review was thus a means of establishing an online community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that was not stable (Marshall, 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009), but that was based on exchanges rooted in support. The reading and writing were done within the specific cultural context that the readers and writers lived in (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, 2005). 21 participants stressed the usefulness of the review—a specific genre of communication (Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Yancey, 2011). Not only was review writing a way to share, but 61 participants framed

reviews as a precursor to action on the reader's side: to either make a purchase or to forgo it. The participants showed that a review ought to be useful for the reader, and that it is an ethical choice that positions the writing act of a review in the realm of service to others.

Ethics were also an issue for participants when describing their general view of investment in online writing from the writer's point of view as well as implications for the readers of online reviews and comments. One survey participant said that posting reviews

took a lot of time but I feel like it is worth it if it is helping someone else! It won't waste their time or money if a bad comment or review is written (...) I would hate for someone to look for my opinion on a topic and I don't post a comment. Yet when I don't post, they then waste their money.

This response demonstrated the level of responsibility online writers take up: on the one hand, the personal decision to become a voice that set out to help others was both a burden and a point of pride. Most importantly, it was seen as a service to the broader community. The writer then wished to gain the peers' investment time in order to assist them in the process of saving money.

Preventing trolling behavior. Participants were frequently preoccupied with the aggression they witnessed in online spaces. 49 said they would advise first time online writers to specifically keep in mind "others' feelings" or even that an actual person will read the comments and might be "hurt" by any "rude" or "mean" language. What I found most significant was the insistence with which the participants spoke of this point: the participants wanted to stress the care for others as the initial advice about participating in online discussions. I expected to see answers connected to the technical aspects of writing, but instead, I received an in-depth lesson on how to avoid becoming a troll. This is another interesting point: participants did not caution against the presence of trolls—they wanted to make sure that prospective writers themselves did not become

trolls or bullies. Here, the participants are acting as more seasoned participant who were taking on the responsibility of teaching newcomers the first steps in the craft of online participation. The production of the discourse community also resulted in creating a community of practice that relied on teaching newcomers the ethical stances most valued by the existing communities.

Selfishness

Selfishness and pursuing self-interest emerged as a trait of a review troll—be they peers or corporations. Despite the over-all favorable view of reviews, some participants saw reviews as another way for peers to spread negative and malicious information. Survey participants were also aware that some reviews are not genuine as 33 remarked on the presence of hyperbolic and paid for reviews. The fake/paid for reviews were harshly judged and seemed to make survey participants angry. Rose also spoke about paid reviews and paid content masquerading as genuine customer reviews. She said that being fooled by those reviews both wasted her time and were a deliberate menace towards readers. Rose said:

you get to the end of it and it's like 'oh hey buy this.' There is a link to that—that will help you. That just kills everything. Huge bummer (...) I feel like it's a huge waste of time.

Rose's experience with corporations infiltrating discussions and reviews showed how deeply participants cared about the discourse community trust and bonding. They saw the corporate interests as deliberate time wasters and predators taking an advantage of the review genre. Corporate reviewers were seen as unethical as opposed to private reviewers who were seen as honest and ethical.

Justin asserted that platforms containing opinions, or focused on opinions, had an over-all negative writing culture. "I would say that I find more bad reviews than good reviews [on yelp],

and I think that is in our innate nature to complain more than it is to praise. So any kind of opinionated platform is going to be more negative than positive over-all.” This may seem like a stark or unfair characterization, but it was an assessment more rooted in years of experience and witnessing of development of online bullying. Justin saw the review genre as a reflection of “human nature,” and the Internet as a vehicle for spreading this nature.

Oliver remarked on the selfishness he observed in online spaces. He believed that individual pursuits will inevitably stop people from working collaboratively:

The opportunity and availability to create something greater is always there but humans have this huge margin of error that they will disregard what’s good for the greater whole over what’s good for them. And that’s how human beings work. They don’t work for a greater whole. They work for an inner purpose and an inner drive and thing that they want to produce for themselves.

Oliver was discussing his observations about online reviewers and the lack of integrity they have towards others. In his view, online reviewers were more concerned with producing reviews for their own benefit and not as means of helping others. Reviewers were people who want online fame and recognition—a selfish and empty pursuit that squanders the communal opportunities existing on the Internet.

Both Justin and Oliver were repeating many protectionist arguments, and agreed with opinions of theorists like Adornor and Horkheimer (2012), as well as Postman (1992), and Debord, (1998, 2014). In their general view, the Internet was yet another tool used to bamboozle people, drive them away from one another, and enable the worst of human characteristics. This is a very harsh and stark characterization of both the medium and human behavior, but both Oliver and Justin ascribe to these ideas. Interestingly, neither man shares much with the other: one is a traditional

student from an upper-middle class family. The other is a veteran, a non-traditional student, father of 3 daughters, and from the inner-city projects. Yet, somehow, despite being separated by age, class, and race, they both carry the same set of beliefs when it comes to the Internet. The protectionist ideologies of The Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012) or Debord's (1998, 2014) and Postman's (1992) ideas typify media as creators of spaces that are filled with ugliness and vileness. Between the many educational initiatives warning of the dangers of using the Internet, the trolling present, and outright lies perpetuated with the use of the Internet, it becomes clear that many young people have a very troubled relationship with the Internet (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; McLuhan, 1994; Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2005). The power and prevalence of the protectionist argument is far reaching, and carries profound consequences: each man approaches the Internet with skepticism, and sees peers as profoundly selfish.

Accountability

Accountability was another area of ethical behavior discussed by participants. For Oliver, the lack of accountability was a deciding factor in limiting AODS participation. During his deployment in both Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Oliver had limited access to the Internet. Around his first deployment, Facebook became a "great tool" but then transformed into "a huge tool"—an annoyance and distraction that brought on more problems than it solved. Oliver reflected on how Facebook evolved to encourage lies and deception:

I no longer felt it was fair of me to judge a person based on a sliver of consciousness they had at that time and then hold them accountable for it. Because no one else was holding each other—anyone accountable (...) there is no accountability for what

anyone says but then we have to assume they are telling the truth. And in most cases people are not telling the truth.

For Oliver, the issue of content and response to that content became secondary points of consideration. Although the functionality of Facebook remained largely the same today, Oliver was no longer willing to participate in this platform because the tone of participation others used was not aligned with Oliver's initial goals and his social values.

Oliver positioned accountability, judgment, and critical engagement with the Internet as equally important topics. Oliver's discussion showed that critics like Debord (1998, 2014) and Postman (1992) have it wrong: technology is neither blinding nor paralyzing to the masses. Oliver's ideas about the media were not produced as a result of education, but based on his personal lived experience. Participants like Oliver, were perfectly capable of making moral, logical, and material decisions about their technological lives and not become blinded or numbed by rising technologies. Yet, Oliver's insights were not typical since the presence of technology alone was not a guarantee of liberation, a view expressed by Banks (2011). Rather, there was a profound need for critical media education to pave way for liberation.

Oliver's experience elucidated that, overtime, the development of content and modes of participation changed among his network of friends. What was once a platform for exchanging friendly updates evolved into a platform where content was suspect, offensive, and uncomfortable. Oliver showed that by participating online, we ask that the readers of our writing trust what we say (Yancey, 2011; Ito, 2013; Kress, 2003; Davies, 2008). As readers, participants were welcome to either reject or accept what the others say. However, there was a conflict that arose when there was no system for accountability—there was no way to verify peers, unless they self-disclosed, and even then the exchange was based on trust.

For Oliver, the purpose of these exchanges was connected to trusting and judging what others say. The central question for him was: why should I trust what others are saying here? Issues of anonymity, identity, and value were some of the implications (Gee, 2007; Poster, 2013; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006). However, there was another layer present here: critical reading and understanding of the texts produced. Fundamentally, Oliver began to distrust the content of the platform because of the tone writers were using in communicating (Street, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Despite the efficient mode of transmission of messages available (Davies, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Ito, 2013; McLuhan, 1994), the convenience negated the purpose: why participate if the communal behaviors shifted and put us on the outside of the discourse (Kress, 2003; Gee, 2007,)? Oliver felt on the outside of the discourse as he was not willing to trust the messages, and could not judge the persons who were producing these messages (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998; Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005).

Like Oliver, Justin pointed to the lack of accountability in spaces like Yelp: “Yelp is a place where you can be mean and no one will get angry at you.” The lack of repercussions for “bad behavior” was an ethical issue that materialized and seemed to be an off-putting reality for some peers. Justin pointed out that there was a possibility of engaging in a negative and destructive tone, because of a lack of oversight of posts as well as lack of communal response to the content posted. In essence, Justin positioned Yelp as an unethical space where reviewers unleashed hurtful behavior, and where no one stood up to trolls (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011; Nakamura, 2008).

Accountability became even more complex when discussing spaces that allowed peers to be more anonymous. Ian noted that anonymity allowed some peers to engage in angry outbursts, and when asked to compare spaces that were anonymous with ones that are not, he pointed out

that “I think the anonymous [spaces] tend to be a little more vile. I mean people tend to go a lot further when they don’t have a direct --there’s no potential for direct recourse.” Ian’s word choice showed that he judged anonymous behavior harshly. As Ian, Tom, and John discussed, there were many peers in AODS who treated anonymity as a way to spread hate, attack others, and engage in violent behaviors (Franklin, 2005; Landow, 2006; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Nakamura, 2008). As the participants pointed out, the lack of accountability allowed peers to tap into the most base forms of expression, and the participants judged this tone as unacceptable.

There was a different form of accountability that arose for young online peers: the limits set by their parents. Although many people may not care about what their parents tell them and break the rules of joining online communities, many young peers may have very different experiences (Ito, 2013; Morrell, 2008; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Coiro et. al., 2014). For Michael, accountability to parents was important as he was not willing to break any rules set forth by them:

My parents’ expectation was high so we would always try to meet them (...) my mom hated [the Internet] (...) I knew that too much of it in her eyes was not good so I never really tried to do too much of it.

Michael felt that his peers ultimately drove him to use the Internet, and not his parents or teachers. Even once he had access to the Internet at home, Michael metered his usage to be minimal so that he would meet his parents’ high expectations of him. Michael fit Coiro et. al.’s (2014) analysis that children with Internet access at home are sometimes least prepared for challenges of online spaces. In this paradox, the access (Lievrouw, 2002, 2006; Franklin, 2005) obtained did not equal critical awareness or ability to skillfully maneuver the many issues that abound in online spaces.

Despite his online freedom, Michael's experiences were quite tumultuous. Lacking the parental or educator guidance or oversight (Coiro et. al., 2014; Yancey, 2011; Lievrouw, 2002, 2006) led Michael to develop aggressive online behaviors that were not aligned with his physical world behaviors. Often described as mature, Michael felt that his online behaviors were anything but mature. There was no one that Michael was accountable to, and this has allowed him to engage in the type of behavior that he felt unable to explore at home or at school. After entering college and gaining greater self-esteem, Michael reflected on his online usage and altered his participation radically. Because of these experiences, Michael developed an ethics of Internet usage that was based on self-discipline and self-accountability.

Social Relationships. AODS enabled participants to build communities in various ways. In some instances, communities formed in a stable way around commonly shared topics. Michael discussed belonging to a relatively stable community that gathered in forums dedicated to anime. Ian belonged to several forums, some for years, that enabled him to build long lasting relationships with peers. But in other instances, communities formed on a more infrequent basis. Tom talked about infrequently writing in forums dedicated to technological issues and not becoming deeply involved with any peers there. However, though infrequently, Tom saw the peers on the forums as joined in a community that he believed was sustained by the topic and shared values of the visitors. The issues of community are diverse, but some processes involved in the communal aspect of AODS were shared across platforms. Establishing communities, personal development of peers, identity formation of peers, and the plural nature of opinions were shared across various spaces and remarked on by both survey and interview participants.

Community Building. Building online communities does not align with some traditional means of community building offline. As opposed to the process of establishing a shared connection

with a stable and maintained population, community building in AODS functioned on a contribution and consumption basis. On the one hand, contributing to communities meant that participants recognized and honored communal standards in their writing. On the other hand, peers read contributions and benefitted from them. The act of participating in product reviews functioned as a means of building a community (Wenger, 1999). Survey participants showed a range of strategies for community formation (see Figure 25).

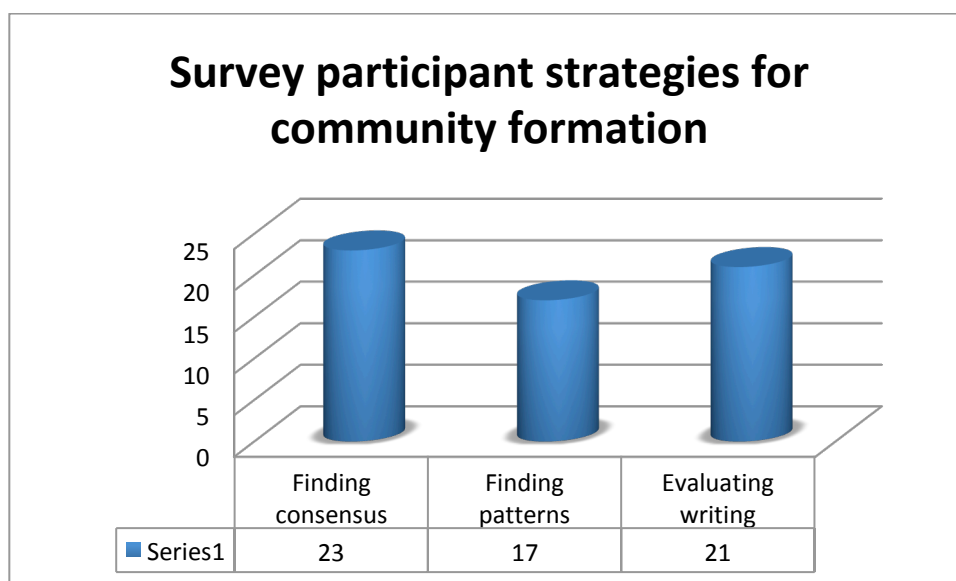


Figure 25: Survey participant strategies for community formation

As shown in Figure 25, reviewers added their voice to existing reviews, and the readers of reviews joined in community formation through a separate set of techniques such as seeking consensus (23 participants), looking for patterns (17 participants), or evaluating the writing posted (21 participants). Each strategy used the communally generated writing, pooled the writing together, and measured the information against the collected whole. In essence, the power of the community hinged on the multimodal capability to pull together a cacophony of voices. Survey participants demonstrated that the writers of reviews wanted to give their time and effort, but in exchange, wanted to gain the time of the review readers.

But towards what end did the writers wished to gain the time investment of the readers? Survey participants gave a possible answer: writing comments and reviews “Makes me feel like I'm part of the conversation and that if you give a good review it can benefit in some way.” Another participant said that:

It's easy to comment on things when you have an opinion about them, participating in comments also allows for one to not feel alone in a response/reflection of an experience. Commenting on things is a unifying experience when it is not done anonymously.

Another participant described writing online reviews “I felt great after writing a review because I know that my commentary will influence others to either buy something or completely avoid it.” The writers wished to be an active part of the community that formed around the topics or products (Davies, 2008; Liverow, 2006). In this way, an exchange of ideas and opinions became the central focus of online reviews and discussions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Alvermann, 2008; Gee, 2007; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009). It is an economy based on personal experience where writing was the currency through which literacies were exchanged (Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998). However, the pay-off was not merely the feeling of belonging, or expressing one’s opinion, but the positive feelings were brought on by the writer’s knowledge that readers had tangible benefits from receiving information.

Social development. For many participants, the world of online interactions provided a missing space to learn information, to connect with others, and to meld the learning and the social together (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008; Gee, 2007). For some participants, turning to the online world was the only viable and safe option to seek self-understanding. Robert attended

Church and study groups throughout his adulthood, but the process of identity exploration did not take place in the physical world:

when I was coming out I was online a lot because I was not out to anybody so I was online looking at a lot of gay Christian sites, ChristianGays.com really helped me come out and the Gay Christian Network is still largely around. Those two were instrumental to me. I was doing a lot of reading but having the community was instrumental.

Robert's experience with coming out illustrated the intimacy and vulnerability of identity exploration. For some people, the process of coming to terms with sexuality or other types of identities may be supported by friends, family, or others in the physical world. But for many, like Robert, the process of self-understanding happened with the help of peers in AODS (Franklin, 2005; Morrell, 2008; Poster, 2013). For Robert, having the ability to consume information and discuss it led to personal acceptance and eventual coming out.

Susan's experience with online forums was centered around personal care. Like Robert, Susan experienced community of support and information sharing. "Usually people [on forums] are very supportive. When it comes to skin problems and health problems they are very supportive which is very nice and they are not attacking you." Susan's experience of discussion boards was quite unique from what others have described—for her, the communities she was a part of were nothing but supportive, nice, and welcoming towards members. Susan's experience showed that the ethics of positive participation were present in many spaces where communal support enabled peers to succeed in achieving goals. It seemed that a part of the culture of affirming spaces was hinged on the peers' ability to value individual subjectivities (Poster, 2013; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Loomba, 1998). Through the act of sharing and support, peers

empowered one another and created a culture that was not based on being right, or on convincing others, but based on sharing of perspectives (Morrell, 2008; Banks, 2011) and experiences. These communities rejected the need to create “agree to disagree” attitude or even a need to “tolerate difference.” Quite the opposite: these communities called for as many voices to speak as possible and as many stories to fill the discussions as possible (Nakamura, 2008; Landow, 2006; Banks, 2011; Franklin, 2005; Poster, 2013; Loomba, 1998).

Identity formation

The potential for online spaces to foster personal exploration, role-play, and alternative behavior were well known to online peers (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Ito, 2013; Morrell, 2008; Yancey, 2011; Poster, 2013; McLuhan, 1994; Kellner & Share, 2005)—even those who did not engage in their own explorations. Sean described the participation of others based on what he observed in online spaces:

I think it provides people a venue where they can express their thoughts, points of view. Allows them in one sense to take on a new identity, and identity here there is less of a risk to encounter someone you are familiar with which then perhaps leads to greater sense of securing that second identity. In other words, this participation can be a type of secondary discourse. (...) You can learn from it.

Sean was a lurker who did not post, but who participated through reading. Sean’s description of the process of creating and exploring an online identity was specific and interesting. He saw the value in this act and discussed the benefits of using online spaces as means of personal exploration. He described these processes as akin to training wheels where peers got to practice behaviors and explore identities that were not ready to be embodied in the physical world (Ito, 2013; Yancey, 2011; Franklin, 2005; Nakamura, 2008; Poster, 2013; McLuhan, 1994; Lievrouw,

2001, 2006; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins, 2008, 2009). Sean showed a great level of support to people who used online spaces towards their own growth. Sean stressed the need for safety and comfort in many of these types of explorations and highlighted AODS ability to provide these features (Landow, 2006; Poster, 2013; Lievrouw, 2001, 2006; Gee, 2007).

Exploring identities in AODS was not always connected with who participants might become, but who they were seen as by broader social structures. The identity of “Millennial” emerged quickly in survey responses and interviews as participants equated their knowledge of information technology with their identity as Millennials. The overwhelming majority 54, of responses pointed to “just knowing” about the online discussions and reviews because they were features-- “a part of the Internet.” Simultaneously, the 54 responses pointed to this knowledge being a products of being a Millennials who grew up with the Internet. These findings follow Kress’ (2003) analysis of the ongoing shifts in the relationship between literacy and technology. Although Kress (2003) pointed to the shift towards “screens” and the impact computers have on writing, and although he posited that there were shifts in imagination as a result of the ongoing technological advances, I do not think that Kress was able to foresee just how profound this shift was, and how wide-ranging the implications of the changes were. For the Millennial generation, the idea of composing was indeed multimodal and far more multifaceted than for their predecessors.

In addition, participants pointed to a connection between their age and the Internet. As one participant wrote: “I think I've always known about them. I grew up with the rise of Internet so it's always just been something that was there.” It seems that the Internet was shown here as a contemporary—a peer so to speak. Susan, Justin, John, and Rose all said that they grew up “with” the Internet, so knowing about AODS was not a noticed reality, but rather a reality similar

to learning to talk or walk—a mere part of the developmental process. Millennials claimed the Internet in this way because, for them, the medium was available from an early age and seems to have blended seamlessly into their lives. One participant pointed out that: “I’m a millennial. If it’s part of an Internet page, we just know how to find it.” Millennial participants, then, believed they had a greater awareness of the architecture, structure, and function of various aspects of the Internet, including AODS. 39 participants went as far as to say that they found discussion spaces “naturally,” and “always” used them, indicating a process of growth and exploration that they believed was somehow innate, and even more importantly, organic. In essence, these comments showed that the Internet was not so much a tool for Millennials, but something more intimate and close to themselves. The Internet, and all of its parts, played such a multifaceted role in the lives of Millennials, that the medium had become a hegemonic power (Gramsci, 1988) that was inextricable from Millennial lives. In this sense, the medium became an extension of the “subject” (McLuhan, 1994) and was a part of the Millennial group’s lives much more so than any other technology.

In many ways, the participants’ ages were a major contributor to how they saw themselves in relation to the issues of Internet usage. The older participants were either convinced they were pioneers, or saw themselves as somehow behind the times. However, the same can be said for the Millennial participants. There were no hard or fast rules when it came to how participants related to the development of the internet and their own social development. Participants from all age groups saw themselves as disconnected and unwilling to engage in the medium. Similarly, participants for all age groups saw themselves as contemporaries of the Internet and its development. How could that be? I believed this was an issue of access and personal preference and a clear example of the issues of the Perfect Storm. There simply are no means of predicting

who among our students is a lover of the internet and who is not a fan. As researchers and educators, we must pursue how this trend in particular develops over time. It is possible that the newer generations, that will start college soon, will have yet another set of ideas and comfort levels towards the Internet. We must attend to this factor especially since educational resources are increasingly delivered and produced online. As participants showed, virtually all classes use spaces like Blackboard and demand that research for assignments be completed using online resources. Similarly, libraries have transitioned to online cataloging and resource production, so any college student today and in the future has no choice but to interact with online tools and spaces. As educators, we must understand how comfortable our students are in these spaces instead of guessing and assuming based on anecdotal evidence.

Plurality

The survey revealed that many participants were aware of, and cautious of the variety of opinions online readers held. One participant said: “Not everybody is going to read your comments and think the same thing.” 39 responses echoed this sentiment and demonstrated participants’ understanding of what communal participation was like. In this specific instance, communal participation required an open mind and an expectation of a plurality of opinion (Nakamura, 2008; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Loomba, 1998; Coiro et. al., 2014). In other words, if anyone wanted to participate in forums or write reviews, they needed to accept the inevitable reality that other peers will disagree or might be offended—a splintered audience with each individual believing in something else or having a differing set of literacies to draw from (Poster, 2013; Lievrouw, 2001; Marshall, 2007; Jenkins 2008, 2009).

For the participants, seeing a plurality of opinions seemed to be a gateway to understanding how communities were formed, and how begin forming communities themselves. One participant in

particular remarked that online participation showed “how to effectively communicate with others online when not directly communicating with them, building a community.” The practice seemed to be linear: 44 participants specified needing to “test the waters” first through understanding discussion participants as a group before moving to participation, and finally, to what participants described as building community. This process was strikingly similar to participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but what sets it apart was the self-directed nature of it. Online participation was a process of self-discovery and personal education for all peers (Ito et. al., 2013; Yancey, 2011). There were few educators or professionals involved in introducing and including peers in online discussions (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Kellner & Share, 2007; Morrell, 2008; Yancey, 2011; Banks, 2011). The absence of experienced peers acting as guides caused all online participation to be self-directed, and thus, confusing, hard, and demanding (Yancey, 2011). Yet, because online participation was a self-selected activity (Coiro et.al, 2014), lessons derived from participation were more powerful than school-mandated education. At the very least, online peers chose to return to the online discussions and reviews instead of becoming disengaged at the first encounter of discomfort.

Despite a nuanced and complex understanding of writing in online spaces, the problems associated with the participants’ favoring of sophisticated writing emerged: writing that was judged as unclear, ungrammatical, and unsophisticated was deemed suspect at best and not believable at worst. Ironically, participants emerged as favoring an un-pluralistic language for online participation—they had no patience or did not show tolerance for peers with diverse language skills. The consensus opinion of the participants was that unsophisticated writing skills were synonymous with poor information, malice, and time wasting. 44 survey participants

agreed that they were likely to give credence to posts and reviews featuring strong and clear writing—yet, the stereotype of a good writer in no way precluded trolls and jacklegs from taking an advantage and playing other peers for fools. Hence, the stereotype of the “good online writer” was dangerous as it potentially lead many peers to believed outright lies and propaganda simply because they were written using clear prose. Further, and more importantly, by prejudging posts with language issues, the participants were exhibiting prejudices against non-native speakers of English, writers with less training in composition, any peer who had limited educational opportunities, technological newbies, older peers, etc. (Bourdieu, 1973, 1991; Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Darder & Uriarte, 2013).

The preference towards “proper” English was a reflection of power and dominance of hegemonic and colonial values that are often underpinning American educational systems (Bourdieu, 1973, 1991; Scribner & Cole, 1978, 2001; Selfe & Selfe, 2011; Darder & Uriarte, 2013).. Survey and interview participants, unknowingly or intentionally, perpetuated the colonizing ideas. The Internet continued to be a colonized space where few voices were shared and valued equally.

Value

Internet and AODS were described as important parts of participants’ lives. Whether in their education, personal pursuits, identity formation, or fun, AODS were an integral part of participants’ daily lives. But how much value did participants give their participation? The answers to this question were complex and often contradictory. Participants specified that online participation provided them affirmation as they felt that their voices were taken seriously and given credence by other readers. It was one thing to feel like someone read/heard a point we made, but feeling like people believed what we said might raise the level of utterance from

merely done to adding value to our opinions. Naturally, the threat of becoming a jackleg arises as well. But what if feeling empowered in one's own opinions lead to the opposing phenomenon of opening minds and giving value to more opinions? Survey participants described how much and why they valued their online participation (see Figure 26).

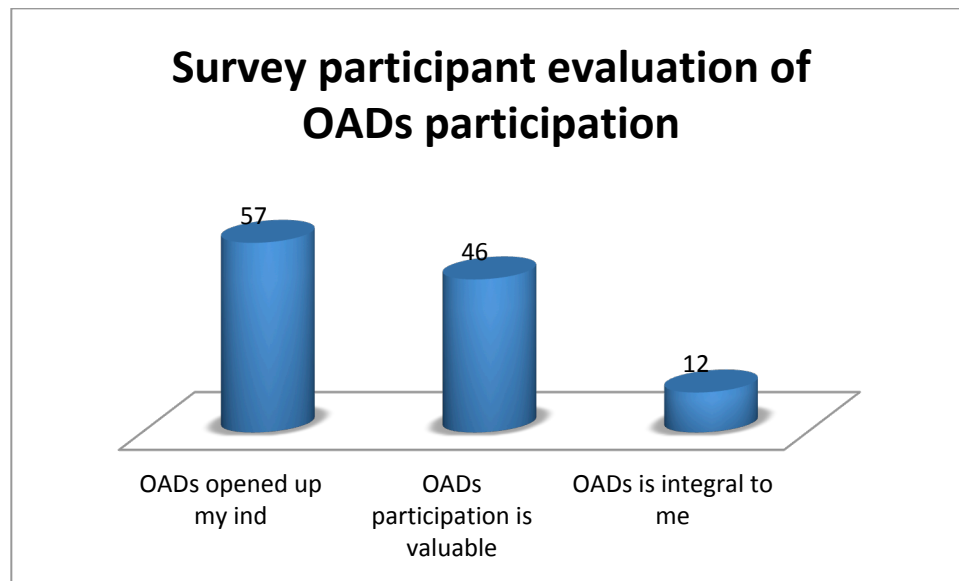


Figure 26: Survey participant evaluation of AODS participation

As shown in Figure 26, 57 participants pointed to valuing online discussions and reviews precisely because they opened up their minds. Unsurprisingly, most participants, 46, expressed that they found their participation to be very valuable. 12 participants described how integral participating in online spaces is to them:

As a reader of these pieces of information rather than a writer, I have found this knowledge to be extraordinarily helpful. Without niche discussion boards I would have a very difficult time troubleshooting certain problems,

and another participant wrote that “participating, [...] feels rather satisfying because there is this notion that everyone is going to read your opinion making it worth something” and yet another said that “As an observer, reading comments is humorous or informative. As a participant, it is

empowering.” Within these answers, both the act of reading and the act of writing provided a tremendous sense of accomplishment. The participant who discussed the “niche” discussions in particular demonstrated that communal problem solving was available as a free resource online, and was a “saver” in difficult situations—a resource that could be used whenever needed. This answer tapped into tangible value for the participant both in terms of literacy, but also in terms of material and social gains (Davies, 2008; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Another participant echoed these feelings: “As a reader of online discussions, I have found many valuable pieces of information. I have been able to replicate rather complicated computer builds, artistic concepts, or otherwise gain less prevalent opinions and perspectives” yet again demonstrating that this set of participants found a great deal of diverse information in online forum discussions that lead to tangible results, like production of computer equipment. These results translated into valuable knowledge that benefitted the participants on the practical as well as monetary level thus freeing them from the constraints of institutional learning (Nakamura, 2008; Davies, 2008).

However, more emotive values were also described: a sense of empowerment, a sense of voice, and above all, a sense of accomplishment (Anzaldua, 1987; Loomba, 1998; Spivak, 1990). Above, the reading act of online spaces was described as “humorous or informative” and contrasted with the act of writing in these spaces, which was described as “empowering.” The sense of empowerment took many forms for the participants ranging from the feeling of being heard to the feeling of emotional cleansing (Landow, 2006; Franklin, 2005). One participant specified that online participation provided an opportunity to achieve liberation: “I got to express my thoughts on my experience, and in a way it was liberating because I got to provide feedback.” The liberation discussed here could be achieved by any online writer who craved the feeling of catharsis. In no uncertain terms, participation in online comments or reviews had the

potential to provide a venue where peers spoke back to power (Landow, 2006, Nakamura, 2008; Franklin, 2005). Particularly in customer reviews, participants entered the space to share their subjective experiences.

Participants point to valuing AODS participation as “increasing in value because the Internet is becoming quite relevant in our daily lives” and note that “in a world which social network on the Internet is a growing key to success it's important to know how to use social media.” Social media, online discussions, and reviews existed as a continuous space for the participants who were keenly aware of the power of the medium they had to learn to operate on their own. Educators then are late to the table, so to speak, but ought to become involved in educating the youth about these issues (Yancey, 2011; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007; Morrell, 2008). It is an imperative and growing necessity arising from the global realities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: COMING BACK HOME

As I conclude this work, the house is quiet, the baby is asleep, but a few feet away, there sits my husband researching the chemical reactions that take place during the process of making hollandaise sauce. He used to make it every night out of a different recipe he found online, and we would have it with dinner until I made him stop (3 months of hollandaise is all I could stomach). He tried to make it two nights ago, but after 3 tries, I made him stop. He was out of practice after not making it for nearly 10 years. Now he was back to the drawing board, but he wanted to understand not only the practice of making the sauce, but also the chemistry of what made this impossibility exist. I am sure that I am about to eat hollandaise for the next 3 months as he experiments, discusses, and tweaks the technique through both trial-and-error as well as online discussions with other cooks. This time, I will not make him stop for 10 years.

These turns of interest are normal in our home. My husband will see something, hear something, or want something, and off he will go on a digital quest to be able to do whatever fascinates him or becomes necessary. These days, he mostly focuses on understanding various points of construction, baby nutrition, and immigration law. A few weeks back I had a scare: green card holders were being rounded up for old misdemeanors and deported. For a few days, we talked about packing go-bags and being ready for my possible arrest. But as he talked with immigration lawyers through Reddit, Quora, and other AODS, our fears were assuaged, I began to sleep again, and the long list of people wanting to help me revived my faith in America. My life, and the life of my family is actively shaped by my husband's participation on AODS. I know that we are not the only family who are impacted by AODS in this way.

A look back and a look forward

Throughout this dissertation, I looked at the ways college students use online spaces, particularly asynchronous online spaces, to learn, form communities, explore and experiment with identities, and intertwine their lives with technology. For many participants, particularly the non-traditional students like Oliver, Ian, and Robert, AODS were complicated spaces that both frustrated and permitted development. For Millennial participants, the Internet as a whole, and AODS in particular, were integral and “natural” parts of life. There were no singular views on AODS, and I learned that seeing individual and small narratives about these spaces was more crucial than creating generalizations. Our society already had enough of that. In 2017, many authors chose to focus on the broad stories that emerged from big-data collections and drew rather harmful stereotypes. Jean M. Twenge (2018), in particular, chose to use data from longitudinal surveys, Monitoring the Future (MtF), Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, The American Freshman Survey and The General Society Survey in order to draw her conclusions. For her, seeing the small narratives was merely a means of “illustrating” her points, and not as means of actually understanding what young people accomplished using online spaces. Twenge disparages the small studies, such as this one, as not representative enough, too biased, too shabby to be of definitive value. In other words, qualitative research was useless compared to the “gold standard” of broad-ranging surveys. To me, Twenge represents the kind of researcher who is happy to erase people and boil people down to numbers, statistics, and generalities. But people are not as easy to understand as the answers they give on bubble-sheets, and small studies capture a bit more than an arbitrary “yes” or “no” answer to a question a researcher constructed in 1976 (as is the case with the questions on the MtF).

For Twenge, people born after 1995 constitute generation “I,” or iGen as she called them. The “I” stood for individualism and income inequality. To Twenge, iGenners were simultaneously

taking individualism for granted and were fearful of monetary success. But the image she proceeded to draw in her book did not focus on showing a generation strengthened by their online involvement, or even capable of living a life. Twenge presented a generation that did not want to grow up, spent most of its time on the Internet, was insecure, depressed, removed from “traditional” social values, was uninterested in working, driving, sex, drinking, and so on. In effect, according to Twenge, iGen was filled with Peter Pans who wanted nothing to do with the real world, and did not want to make connections with people in the physical world. Twenge arrived at a conclusion that iGenners are the most depressed, desperate, and isolated generation so far. She ended her book with a disturbing call to “save” iGen, because to her, they are at peril. And who/what was to “blame”? The Internet, of course.

Page after page, Twenge pushes forward, spewing data, and making assumptions that the data did not demonstrate. To say that young people are not seeking employment and are not getting more in school activities is one thing. But to then say, without any data to support the assertion, that the cause is Internet use, is poor scholarship and prejudice towards a generation she neither understands nor values. Even assertions that seem supported by data did not take into consideration many cultural shifts that Twenge purports to be documenting. Specifically, her analysis of depression in iGen assumes that iGen is more depressed than previous generations based on the data from the national surveys. But what Twenge does not understand is the radical shift in the way mental health awareness and social acceptance of it had shifted in the recent decades. Were teens happier 10 or 20 or 30 years ago? In truth, it is impossible to say as the stigma of even talking about mental health prevented reporting or even honest responses on surveys. In the end, Twenge’s work amounts to an attack at a rising culture that is outside of her

generational understanding. Twenge's work fell square into protectionist and alarmist ranks that produce nothing more than sensationalist headlines and little actual substance.

Ultimately, Twenge advocates ways to “save” iGeners thus perpetuating the stereotype that young people need saving at all. But just as I wrapped up my final edits, something quite extraordinary happened: survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Valentine's Day shooting organized massive international protests and walk-outs that called for gun control (Kirby, 2018.). All of the organizers were under 18, still in high school, still grieving their lost friends and teachers. These kids—certainly members of iGen by Twenge's estimation, used online spaces like Twitter and Facebook to call for support, in this effort. Only a few weeks earlier, the same students livestreamed the horror of the attack (Griggs, 2018). As the protests and walk-outs started, the world got to see a composed, angry, and intelligent group of youth ready to postpone their plans for the future and speak back to power in a way that adults were afraid to (Kirby, 2018.). The young protesters called out politicians who were in the pocket of the NRA, delivered heart breaking, rhetorically nuanced, and politically explosive speeches that illustrated the depths of failure of the adults today (Kirby, 2018). We failed them—educators, parents, and policymakers all failed to protest the children who were being gunned down in American schools on a nearly daily basis. Politicians continuously abdicated their position of power in favor of sponsorship from the National Rifle Association offering “thoughts and prayers” in place of political reform (Embury-Dennis, 2018). Parents failed by voting in weak politicians and perpetuating the systems that enabled gun ownerships without any useful restrictions. And now the children were sick of it. Instead of waiting for adults to do the right thing, the children were out in the streets reminding the adults that they were about to grow up, and that the midterm elections were merely months away.

In the face of such a powerful, swift, and far-reaching action from the youth, Twenge's book emerges as ridiculous. The youth today live in a world that Twenge does not understand and the youth must maneuver realities that never even occurred to Twenge when she was in high school. In effect, what Twenge did was add to the chorus of voices that was pushing forward "intense parenting" as described by danah boyd (2014). As boyd noted, "intense parenting," otherwise called "helicopter parenting, was a style of parenting popular in the United States. In this style of parenting, parents involve themselves in the lives of their children to an extreme extent going as far as monitoring all conversations, media use, and movements of the child" (2014). While boyd is careful to show that this style of parenting is a social norm on the rise in the U.S., Twenge treated it as a fact and gave pointers that would turn any parent into an intense parent. It is through the final chapter of her book that Twenge revealed the depths of her hypocrisy—though through the book she purported not to blame anyone for the decline of the American teen, her final set of directives showed that parents necessarily need to step in and eliminate the threat the Internet poses. Advice such as installing time-limiting apps on a child's phone only encourage parents to see the Internet as needing to be limited as opposed to discussed. This advice also positions the child in a disempowered space where they do not have a say in how their time is spent and their life organized.

For boyd, the reality of parental involvement was a contributing factor in the way young people engage with technology. For some teens in boyd's study, the intense parent was merely a fact of life, while others were frustrated by it. What I found in my study was that parental involvement was important to Michael, Rose, Susan, and Ian. In Michael's case, parents were the opposite of helicoptering, but the expectations they had of him were clear. Knowing what his parents thought about time utilization guided Michael's decisions about Internet use. Susan experienced a similar

situation where her mother had clear expectations and did not condone Susan prematurely engaging AODS spaces like Facebook. However, Susan's mother supported Susan's usage of spaces that were designed for children. Susan chose to experiment with Facebook prematurely, but knowing that her mother disapproved led her to feeling ashamed and subsequently quitting Facebook until she was old enough to sign up legally. Ian's experience is most stark, as he was given a computer and Internet access with only one directive: explore. He did so and was one of the most prolific users in the participants set with the broadest range of literacies gained as a result of his participation. What Michael's, Susan's and Ian's parents shared was not a specific approach to parenting, but rather a choice to teach their children about their expectations. What Twenge advocated in her approach was eliminating, or at the very least, minimizing the dialogue between parental expectations and child desires. However, what emerges as today's reality is that adults must listen to children, give up control sometimes, and create safety at the administrative level. The safety must come from limiting gun access, expanding media education, and connecting youth digitally. As Ernest Morrell discussed over 10 years ago, the Internet is a way to connect people who are struggling for liberation with broad audiences. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School understand this very well and are using the media spaces available to them to create a global movement to protect children from gun violence. However, educators need to begin opening up these discourses on a daily basis, and not only in wake of tragedies. The youth need to become global citizens so that they can begin to resist and combat against predatory practices such as election meddling, trolling, and colonialism. I was most alarmed by Twenge's attempt to create a label for a group that she then tried to define in terms of deficiencies. She worked to show that iGen was removed from the Millennials with whom Twenge identified. But Twenge's efforts show only one thing: she wanted to create an us-

versus-them scenario and position the younger generation in the spotlight while showing that Millennials were somehow stronger, better, more able to take care of themselves. According to Twenge, nearly all of my participants would be iGen, but what she missed out was the reality of identity formation, and the power of the Millennial appeal. The participants of this study overwhelmingly identified themselves as Millennials. In fact, the results of my study suggested an investment on the part of the participants in being seen as Millennials, and being a part of the first generation to be born digital. To my participants, even the older ones, the Internet was a fact of life and a reality they lived in. But far from being a burden or a barrier from living, it was merely an extension of their activities. In fact, the Internet worked as a part of their identity mostly as an aspect of being a Millennial.

For participants like John, the Internet was only one part of the media world, and “as an American, [his] distraction from media [was] more media.” John pointed out the reality that all Americans share a preoccupation with media, and that a variety of media exist in any American’s life. The media have the power to distract, as Justin pointed out, but they also have the power to teach, bring people together, and reflect the complexities of the world. The media, and the Internet in particular are multifaceted. As danah boyd wrote (2014), the relationship of youth and the Internet was complex and not easily captured, but ultimately, Internet usage is not “wrong or bad” as some of boyd’s participants worried. In fact, Internet usage has the potential to liberate, inform, and unite people who need to come together to speak back to power. In a world of rising political tensions and increasing pressure from destructive trolls, it is up to the people to come together and create coalitions to resist.

This dissertation did not only seek to join boyd in attempting to show the complexities of Internet usage, but to specifically see how college students in the 20 teens approached the

Internet as a potential space to educate themselves. As boyd noted, “teen voices rarely shape public discourse.” Though boyd’s participants were younger than mine, the age difference was not that large. The task to bring the voices of the youth into public discourse is not only important, but a crucial part of countering voices such as Twenge’s who seek to silence the youth with the big-data collections and disembodied number charts. The only way to ensure that voices are heard is to “pass the microphone” around: give each participant space to share their ideas and take the time to hear as many stories as possible. Most importantly, the process of sharing these stories must be public, ongoing, and loud.

Towards an education

The Perfect Storm arrived when no one was paying attention, and to most the reality of the Perfect Storm is still unknown. Many educators and policy makers do not consider how the intersections of shifts in technological proliferation and college student population changes alter the meaning of teaching English and other subjects. What we do and how we react to these changes are necessarily subjects of immediate actions. We cannot bury our heads in sand and pretend that the world has not changed. We cannot ignore the technology that is consistently changing the lives of our students and impacting the preparation they receive before they enter our classes. We cannot pretend that the populations in our classrooms are the same as they were when we were starting college. And most of all, we cannot act as though what happens beyond our classroom walls does not impact our students.

These realities are not individual points to tackle separately over a course of years of study—all of these variables add together to create a complex maze that educators, policymakers, and parents need to approach as a singular reality. We must resist the temptation to fracture these variables into separate areas to study. We must conduct studies that account for

intersections of these points and create spaces that are responsive to the complexities of today's world. What I found shattered my initial assumptions and showed me that I understood very little, despite seeing that Internet use, and AODS involvement had educational possibilities. By "educational possibilities" I do not mean merely school-based literacy building. In fact, the possibilities go far beyond the realms of schooling, and often present more valuable lessons than what the classroom can offer. Non-traditional students, veterans, and non-traditional learners in this study showed that AODS were a liberation from the standard structures of education. This reality poses a stark problem for any educator who wishes to engage with the AODS in the classroom. For one, there is the issue of understanding what AODS are, how they function, and how students use them. But to begin, educators can open up discussions that demystify the language used to describe and name internet spaces. Demystifying metaphors used to describe internet spaces such as "forum" can help students see beyond the label of the word and note what the word hides and how. Students can observe how language of the face-to-face world obfuscates many Internet practices and that the obfuscation creates potential for inequities and confusions. In effect, naming the realities hidden by the metaphors will lead to discussions of power in online spaces—critical issues that online users must engage in to be brought closer towards personal liberation and abdication of their part in the process of disempowering others. Such conversations engage online users in a form of praxis that will help to move much of their knowledge from the intuited space and into articulated space. By this I mean that peers engaged in the process of praxis will move their online usage closer towards intentional choices and away from spontaneous ones.

Currently, I believe few educators are able to meaningfully engage with the AODS in teaching, and most only know how to construct busy work assignments that make assumptions about

student knowledge of or interest in AODS. John, Rose, Daniel, and 5 survey participants discussed assignments that used AODS but rang hollow and were annoying. In fact, the assignments discussed showed that educators did not prepare students for working in the digital environment, did not scaffold either the technological nor the ethical discussion into the assignment process, and did not use any form of reflection in the assignments. Daniel in particular spoke of how a You Tube assignment he had to complete in high school was not conducive to learning despite being a prolific user of You Tube in his educational pursuits. Daniel's example is the most accurate representation of what happens when educators jump into the world of youth cultures too quickly, and assume that students will enjoy assignment simply because they involve digital tools. The phenomenon of adults invading youth spaces, particularly information technology spaces, is called the Creepy Tree House (Young, 2008). Once "adults" begin to use spaces the youth did, the youth begin to see the space as invaded and spoiled. For Daniel, the assignment created a Creepy Tree House and took away some of the enjoyment he had of You Tube. However, Daniel's experience would have been quite different if an element of reflection and praxis was introduced into the assignment. In essence, that is something that all educators ought to do when engaging with Internet in their teaching—we have an opportunity to incorporate praxis into the practices of young people, and we should take it. In essence, praxis is the most transferable skill, the basis of critical thinking, and a pathway to global citizenship. Teaching young people to think about the choices they make in online spaces can teach them to be reflexive of themselves and also to interrogate the behavior of others, In this way, praxis becomes another mode of demystifying metaphors, but instead of helping students disassemble words of others, they can learn how to disassemble their own in the context that the words were produced in.

As educators, then, we have to be aware that some spaces do not belong to us, and that using these spaces in the classroom can create an unpleasantness for the students. Any educator considering involving AODS in their teaching needs to seriously consider ways to minimize the invasion. Though the Creepy Tree House is a looming reality, educators cannot afford to ignore the existence of AODS or other discursive spaces online. After all, we cannot behave as though the Internet does not exist and present curricula that do not prepare students for the realities they will encounter beyond school. Here, I am not being sentimental about the role of school in students' lives, nor am I assuming that teachers have the necessary tools to teach skills students need. What I am arguing for is building a dialogue with students that will be ongoing and necessarily incomplete as technology changes and so do the students. We must create curricula that serve the youth, and put the youth at the center. Most of all, we must create curricula that force the youth to become teachers so that they are placed in a position of articulating what their reality is like, how they interact with it, and thus show the space they need us to occupy. Though we may not be the experts on the technology itself, we can teach about the impact language has, the interconnectivity of lives in online spaces, and the ethics of participation in discussions that promote global and liberationist practices.

I also argue that researchers need to conceptualize their approaches to data collection. As evidenced by Twenge's work, relying on big data sets does not adequately portray the reality of who people are and how their lives shift overtime. It is shocking that Twenge claimed that her work is definitive since the surveys she relied on collected the same data for so long. That is precisely the problem: how can we hope to understand the world if we do not see that our tools are outdated? Twenge's attempt to justify her findings by comparing answers between generations showed only one thing: the cultural context had changed drastically, but the tools

used for data collection had not. The approach taken by researchers like boyd and Ito are the antidote to Twenge's: studying individuals, gathering as many participants as possible, and writing over longer periods of time is the only way to show a glimpse of why the Internet is so fascinating to young people.

But what about the education that the participants were gaining? What were the benefits to them? Indeed, my participants expressed both implicit and explicit educational benefits. Some of the activities participants described were not evidently educational, but taught the participants about something, thus those benefits were implicit. The explicit benefits were obvious to the participants and they spoke about them in those terms. I discovered the tension between the two stances and saw it as a useful way to understand literacy gaining processes. Ultimately, the participants were gaining literacies on two fronts: implicitly through participation and explicitly through deliberate pursuit. The implicit literacy strategies were the most obvious when participants discussed dealing with trolls, or developing reading strategies of review sets. In those moments, participants not only described the activity at hand, they also reflected on what they were doing. The implicit literacy strategy emerged as a fertile ground for praxis creation and literacy building. Explicit literacy building functioned as an additive and enriching strategy that helped with specific tasks. The two strategies often intertwined and resulted in creating enmeshed skills some of which the participants were aware of, and some that were transferred directly into practice. Whichever strategy the participants engaged with, they were conscious of one thing: the technology at hand did not hinder them—it enriched their lives in a variety of ways. Obviously, the above points need to be dissected in greater detail to flesh out their intricacies. But moving towards understanding these processes emerged as a potential framework to understanding the ways that learning through AODS can be theorized in the future.

I want to suggest another type of education that the participants got: by being a part of this study, they were able to be heard, and add their voices to an ongoing debate about the place of information technology in education and daily lives of young people in America. I point this out as a call to action for researchers and educators to become mobilized and to gather more voices on this topic. Returning to boyd's point, the voices of youth are often absent from debates that ultimately shape their lives. As researchers and educators, we create policies through our curricular choices and classroom practices. At the very least, the AODS participation can be recognized and valued by educators, and other adults. As my participants showed, they frequently stigmatized their AODS gained literacies despite finding them valuable. As opposed to school gained literacies, they saw AODS as lesser, and not something to be proud of. And for good reason as Americans are preoccupied with formal education and formally gained literacies. That is not to say that my participants should see their AODS gained literacies as less valuable than classroom based literacies. To the contrary, it is the social understanding of AODS literacies that needs to evolve in order to encourage any willing person to take advantages of the communities that exist online and that are rooted in mutual support.

But why does any of this matter? Beyond the Perfect Storm and its implication to educators there lies the reality that today's students are tomorrow's lawmakers. If there is one thing that 2016 has taught me is that no one is beyond the reach of social media and online spaces—the presidential election meddling touched the entire world as the Donald Trump presidency is wreaking havoc on the world order, and not in a good way. As educators, we have a choice: follow in the footsteps of alarmists like Twenge, or join forces with the youth lead by the survivors of the Margery Stoneman Douglass massacre. I advocate that we do the latter. I say “follow” because we should not see ourselves as leaders in their effort. We need to give them

control over the rising reality that they will continue to shape. What we need to give them is advice and space to understand their actions, and to challenge them to create a world that saves us all.

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Appendix A: Student Survey

1. How would you describe what online comments are (for example: Reddit comments, or comments on blogs) to someone who is unaware of them?
 - a. What are some characteristics of them?
 - b. What advice would you give to a first time writer?
2. How would you describe what customer reviews are to someone who does not know what they are (for example on Yelp or Amazon)?
 - a. What are some characteristics of them?
 - b. What advice would you give to a first time writer?
3. How did you learn about online comments or reviews?
4. Are there specific ways to write comments or reviews?
 - a. What are some things to keep in mind?
5. Do you believe what people write in comments or reviews? Why or why not?
6. Are there any specific topics that you pursue through online comment discussions?
7. How would you describe your involvement with these online spaces? Are you a reader only, or do you also write comments/reviews?
8. Do you ever comment on other people's posts? What is that experience like?
9. What kinds of topics have you discussed before?
10. What types of product have you reviewed?
11. What kinds of knowledge do you think you are gaining through participating in online discussions or reviews?
 - a. What has this knowledge helped you with so far?
 - b. How valuable is this knowledge to you?

12. What types of skills do you think you are learning through participation in online forums?
 - a. What have these skills helped you with so far?
 - b. How valuable are these skills to you?
13. Have you ever seen comments or reviews that included something other than text?
 - a. What did you think about them?
14. Have you ever used content other than text to make a comment or review?
 - a. Why did you chose to comment in this way?
15. Would you ever encourage anyone to participate in online discussion or reviews? Why?
16. How would you describe the social aspect of online forums?
17. How would you describe the type of reading skills you use when reading online discussions or reviews?
18. How would you compare reading skills you use in online spaces with the reading skills you use elsewhere?
19. How would you compare the writing skills you use in online spaces with other types of writing you engage with?
20. Other than reading and writing, what other skills do you believed people can develop in these online spaces?

Appendix B: Researcher Memos

Date	Data Type	Observations	Connections to literature	Possible finding