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## **A Pedagogy of Techno-Social Relationality: Ethics and Digital Multimodality in the Composition Classroom**

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A PEDAGOGY OF TECHNO-SOCIAL RELATIONALITY:  
ETHICS AND DIGITAL MULTIMODALITY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Kristin Ravel

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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August 2019

ABSTRACT  
A PEDAGOGY OF TECHNO-SOCIAL RELATIONALITY:  
ETHICS AND DIGITAL MULTIMODALITY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Kristin Ravel

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019  
Under the Supervision of Professor Anne Frances Wysocki

I bring together the relational ethics of feminist critical theory with approaches of multimodal rhetoric to examine the ethical implications of composing on social media platforms. Most social media platforms are designed to value consumerism, efficiency, quantity of web traffic, and constant synchronous response over concerns of responsible and critical communication. I propose a rhetorical approach of *techno-social relationality* (TSR) as an intervention against such corporate-minded design. Through this approach, I argue that civil engagement is not limited to people's social responsibilities but rather is entwined in complex, material-technical contexts. By considering the responsibility of our machines as much as ourselves, I lay a foundation for the multimodal writing pedagogies I would like to see implemented in composition courses.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Considering Ethics and Technical Mediation Together .....	4
Notes on the Particular Focus of this Dissertation .....	9
Defining a Techno-Social Relational Approach: An Overview .....	12
Chapter One: Framing Ethical Concerns as Social Relational and Material .....	15
Introduction .....	15
Butler’s Feminist Ethics .....	18
Conclusion .....	29
A Last Contextual Note .....	30
Chapter Two: Ethical Mediations of Techno-Material .....	33
Introduction .....	33
Agency and Materiality: Current Conversations in Composition and Rhetoric .....	39
The Limitations of Deterministic Ethics .....	42
Seeing Beyond the Human-Technical Binary .....	47
Toward Material Ethics, 1 .....	50
Toward Material Ethics, 2 .....	61
Chapter Three: Toward an Approach of Techno-social Relationality .....	65
Introduction .....	65
Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People through a Text .....	70
Layer 2: A Composer’ Relationship With the Platform Interface.....	74
Layer 3: A Platform Technology’s Relationship with Other Technologies .....	78
<i>Circulation</i> .....	86
<i>Automation</i> .....	88
<i>Surveillance</i> .....	89
A note about how the layers intersect .....	91
Expanding Our Rhetorical Seeing Through a TSR Approach: Facebook Meme Sharing and Political Consequence.....	92
<i>Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People</i> .....	94
<i>Layer 2: A Composer’s Relationships With Platform Technology</i> .....	98
<i>Layer 3: Platform Technology’s Relationships with Other Technologies</i> .....	105
Expanding Our Rhetorical Seeing Through a TSR Approach: Digital Accumulation and Consumption on and of Pinterest .....	113
<i>Pinterest Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People through a Text</i> .....	124
<i>Pinterest Layer 2: A Composer’ Relationship With the Platform Interface: Pinterest Interface Design,         Affectual Awareness, and Self-reflection within digital environment</i> .....	135
<i>Pinterest Layer 3: A Platform Technology’s Relationship with Other Technologies</i> .....	141
<i>The Three Layers Together</i> .....	150
Conclusion.....	153
Chapter Four: Techno-social Relationality in First-Year Composition Classes.....	155
Introduction .....	155
Introducing Ethical and Techno-Material Awareness in the Composition Classroom .....	156
<i>Bringing Social-Relational Ethics into the Composition Classroom</i> .....	157
<i>Introducing Techno-Material Awareness in the Composition Classroom</i> .....	163
Folding the Three-Layers of TSR in the Composition Classroom.....	169
<i>TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 1</i> .....	173
<i>TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 2</i> .....	184
<i>TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 3</i> .....	190
<i>TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Final Analysis of a Social Media Platform</i> .....	204
Conclusion.....	213

Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	214
Works Cited .....	219
Curriculum Vitae.....	235

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: “September 2016.” Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, <a href="http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/magazine/archive/2016/09">www.psychologytoday.com/us/magazine/archive/2016/09</a> . .....	44
Figure 2: Nesterak, Max, et al. “Me, Me, Me: The Rise of Narcissism in The Age of The Selfie.” NPR, 12 July 2016, <a href="http://www.npr.org/2016/07/12/485087469/me-me-me-the-rise-of-narcissism-in-the-age-of-the-selfie">www.npr.org/2016/07/12/485087469/me-me-me-the-rise-of-narcissism-in-the-age-of-the-selfie</a> . .....	45
Figure 3: One America News tweet. <a href="http://www.Twitter.com">www.Twitter.com</a> . Posted 19 Feb. 2018. ....	81
Figure 4: Sarah Chadwick’s response to the Hogg conspiracy theories .....	84
Figure 5: Twilight Zone meme within Facebook newsfeed. <a href="http://www.Facebook.com">www.Facebook.com</a> . Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017. Selections of this screenshot have been redacted. ....	93
Figure 7: Personal Facebook homepage. <a href="http://www.Facebook.com">www.Facebook.com</a> . Retrieved 14 June 2018. Selections of this screenshot have been redacted. ....	99
Figure 8: Uncle Sam's Misguided Children Facebook pop-up. <a href="http://www.Facebook.com">www.Facebook.com</a> . Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017 .....	107
Figure 9: Screenshot of Uncle Sam's Misguided Children online store. < <a href="https://unclesamsmisguidedchildren.com/">https://unclesamsmisguidedchildren.com/</a> > Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017. ....	108
Figure 10: Top selection of “Red Feed, Blue Feed” homepage. < <a href="http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/">http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/</a> > Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017. ....	110
Figure 11: Pinterest homepage. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 19 May 2019. ....	114
Figure 12: Example of user’s board page. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 19 May 2019. ....	115
Figure 13: Pinterest homepage. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved March 2013. ....	115
Figure 14: Example of user’s board page. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 20 May 2019. ....	116
Figure 15: Example of home décor search on Pinterest. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 20 March 2013. ....	116
Figure 16: Example of home décor search on Pinterest. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 20 May 2019. ....	117
Figure 17: “Keep Calm and Carry On” World War II Motivational Poster. Wikimedia Commons < <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keep-calm-and-carry-on.svg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keep-calm-and-carry-on.svg</a> >. ....	122
Figure 18: Automated description on Pinterest from the Food Network site. Retrieved 20 May 2019. ....	126
Figure 19: Example of comments in response to a user’s pin. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 20. May 2019. ....	127
Figure 20: From the Crate and Barrel 2019 May Collection. <a href="https://view.publitas.com/crate-barrel/2019-may-collection/page/38-39">https://view.publitas.com/crate-barrel/2019-may-collection/page/38-39</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019. ....	130
Figure 21: From the West Elm 2019 March Catalog. <a href="https://www.westelm.com/pages/we-catalog">https://www.westelm.com/pages/we-catalog</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019. ....	130

Figure 22: Top image of Pinterest when search “living room décor”. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019.....	131
Figure 23: Decorative ladder available for purchase from West Elm. < <a href="http://www.westelm.com/products/lcl-tenebras-dressing-ladder-white-ash-h1395/">www.westelm.com/products/lcl-tenebras-dressing-ladder-white-ash-h1395/</a> > Retrieved 27 May 2019. ....	131
Figure 24: Television available for purchase from Pottery Barn. <a href="http://www.potterybarn.com">www.potterybarn.com</a> . Retrieved 20 May 2013.....	132
Figure 25: Example of DIY pin to make a decorative ladder on Pinterest. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019. ....	133
Figure 26: Example of DIY pin for a television stand. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 20 March 2013. ....	134
Figure 27: Pinterest Homepage. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019. ....	135
Figure 28: Image of Target’s Home Board. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 29 May 2019.....	137
Figure 29: Pinterest “Promoted Pin” beta version, showing how a user had to hover over a pin to learn that a pin came from a business. < <a href="https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pinterest-ads_n_4078527">https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pinterest-ads_n_4078527</a> > .....	138
Figure 30: Example of Pinterest 2019 promoted pin on home page. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019.....	139
Figure 31: Zoomed in example of 2019 Pinterest promoted pin. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> . Retrieved 27 May 2019.....	139
Figure 32: “Pin It Forward” campaign logo by Veronica Smith. < <a href="https://www.sfgirlbybay.com/2010/05/19/pin-it-forward-heres-the-schedule/">https://www.sfgirlbybay.com/2010/05/19/pin-it-forward-heres-the-schedule/</a> >.....	143
Figure 33: Photograph from Business Insider showing Pinterest staff at a West Elm store. < <a href="http://www.businessinsider.com/inside-pinterest-an-overnight-success-four-years-in-the-making-2012-4">www.businessinsider.com/inside-pinterest-an-overnight-success-four-years-in-the-making-2012-4</a> >.....	144
Figure 34: Screenshot of the top of West Elm Style Finder webpage. < <a href="http://www.pinterest-style-finder.westelm.com">www.pinterest-style-finder.westelm.com</a> >.....	146
Figure 35: Screenshot showing the button for pinning a recipe from an external site to Pinterest. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.today.com/recipes/no-bake-cheesecake-recipe-t154950">https://www.today.com/recipes/no-bake-cheesecake-recipe-t154950</a> . ....	148
Figure 36: Screenshot showing the social media buttons available for a political article external to Pinterest. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.today.com/video/after-mueller-s-statement-more-democrats-push-for-impeachment-60554821617">https://www.today.com/video/after-mueller-s-statement-more-democrats-push-for-impeachment-60554821617</a> .....	148
Figure 37: Screenshot from Pinterest after search “vaccinations”. <a href="http://www.pinterest.com">www.pinterest.com</a> .....	149
Figure 38: “Keep Calm and Pin On” Meme by Ann Marie A. <a href="http://www.flickr.com">www.flickr.com</a> . Posted 18 September 2011. < <a href="https://www.flickr.com/photos/emerie/6160306023/in/photostream/">https://www.flickr.com/photos/emerie/6160306023/in/photostream/</a> >.....	150
Figure 39: Xenj Jardin Tweet. <a href="http://Twitter.com">Twitter.com</a> . Retrieved 2014. ....	167
Figure 40: Screenshot from “This is your brain on drugs” PSA video. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnENVylxPI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnENVylxPI</a> .....	179

Figure 41: Cropped Screenshot from the "Smoking Gap" Truth PSA.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_182kIOPRvo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_182kIOPRvo) .....181

Figure 42: Cropped Screenshot from the "Smoking Gap" Truth PSA.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_182kIOPRvo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_182kIOPRvo) .....182

Figure 43: Screen shot of Grammar Girl webpage.  
<https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/gender-neutral-pronouns-singular-they> .....186

Figure 44: Screenshot of the "I Heart the Singular They" website.  
<https://iheartsingularthey.com/> .....186

Figure 45: Mr. Rogers Sniper. [www.memecenter.com](http://www.memecenter.com). Retrieved 10 June 2019. ....193

Figure 46: Mr. Rogers Tattoo Meme. [www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com). Retrieved 10 June 2019. ....194



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my dissertation I describe the shortcomings of discourse—how an attempt to communicate will always, at least in part, fail.

As I sit to write my acknowledgements, I can't help but consider how these words here will indeed fail: There is no way for me to fully express my gratitude to those who supported me and challenged me to grow as I wrote my dissertation. However, with humility, I can at the least offer a thank you.

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## Introduction

To talk of “social relations” as if they were independent of technology is therefore incorrect. Indeed, what we call “the social” is bound together as much by the technical as by the social. Society itself is built along with objects and artefacts.

—Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism* (39)

Define Loneliness?

Yes.

It’s what we can’t do for each other.

What do we mean to each other?

What does a life mean?

Why are we here if not for each other?

—Claudia Rankine, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (62)

A friend came across as disinterested during a serious conversation, a new boss at work made the existing employees feel unwelcome, someone talked too much during a class discussion, or a groupwork partner never made eye contact and was too shy to talk: these are some of the examples with which students start every first-year class I teach, when I ask them to get into small groups and to discuss their previous experiences with communicating ethically. One student described an intervention held in the kitchen when her family had to let her grandmother know that she was no longer able to drive for health and safety reasons. Another student shared how she was bombarded (her words) by her friends late at night in a parked car; the friends shared that her always-negative attitude was becoming self-destructive and jeopardizing their friendship with one another.

At some point in these discussions, social media almost always gets mentioned, generating a collective class groan. Students tell me that nothing useful happens on social media (“but,” they add, “it could”). Others make jokes about wanting to quit social media altogether or how they spend too much time on it or how their friends don’t respond to their messages in a timely fashion. Students also describe how various non-linguistic factors affect communication:

a room can be too cold to focus, noisy construction equipment outside can be disruptive, or miscommunication happens during a quickly written text message.

Through discussing and reflecting on how communicative choices have worked (or not worked) in their lives, I invite students to develop a mindfulness of the role that communication has on who they are and how they are connected to others. This first-day activity brings attention to how communication is more than a series of language choices and more than just the effects of words. Through discussions about conversational environments and technologies, we move toward a rhetorical approach that accounts for how communication is intricately bound to material and technical circumstances. As the student “bombed” in the car described, it wasn’t just what her friends told her that makes her memory of the encounter; she always also calls to mind the warming car, the close quarters, the cold outdoors, the fact that there was nowhere else to go or anyone else to turn to, and that there were no sounds but the running engine and the sound of heat from the vents.

I start my class and this dissertation with such examples in order to jump into the conversation on ethics, responsibility, and rhetoric within composition scholarship and pedagogy. A focus on ethics and composing shapes many of the underlying goals I, and many others, have for writing classes. Like others, I want to help students learn to think about how they communicate, to do it more awarely, and to make more thoughtful choices throughout their lives. Attention to ethics invites students to realize how their communication is always connected to social and civic responsibility as well as to the material and technical realities on which communication depends. In short, ethics—within my pedagogical practices and as defined throughout this dissertation—is both *social relational* and *material*. In this dissertation, I tease

out those terms, explaining their background and ramifications for communication and for teaching first-year writing in our digital time.

Such an emphasis on ethics is largely motivated by my readings of feminist rhetorical scholarship and its history of shifting the scope of research and scholarship toward more ethical and inclusive communication practices. As Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch describe in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, feminist rhetoricians have strived for an ethics of hope and care linked to “responsible rhetorical action” (148). Contemporary feminist theory and philosophy have also turned to theorize ethics, describing it as both dependent on social relations (or, as Judith Butler describes, on the self-acceptance and generosity we extend to others) and on materiality (or as Sara Ahmed describes, on how bodies take shape through tending toward objects and spaces). Extending on this feminist work, I develop here a rhetorical approach of what I call *techno-social relationality* (TSR): TSR considers how ethics is not limited only to people’s social responsibilities but is also always entwined in complex, material-technical contexts.

I use *social relational* to emphasize how ethics in rhetoric means moving beyond the belief that persuasion is a communicator’s primary goal; instead, we need to incorporate listening, absorbing, and changing, because, in this light, rhetoric is always a constant push and tug that involves being shaped by and shaping shared social values and our relations with each other.

As Krista Ratcliff argues in *Rhetorical Listening*, rhetorical approaches must move beyond the “grand narrative of U.S. individualism” that imagines a self-actualized or autonomous subject; instead, rhetorical approaches should acknowledge a definition of accountability that understands that we all “have a stake in each other’s quality of life” (31).

*Ethics*, as I understand the term throughout this dissertation, is thus the process of understanding our responsibility toward others within a social context. As I argue in Chapter 1, ethics involves accountability to those in one's immediate social world (family, coworkers, neighbors) as well as for those pushed to the background, ignored, or outside of one's immediate interactions.

*Techno*, as I use it, refers to the material circumstances and the capacities of our technologies. *Techno* acknowledges that rhetorical action is not located in human beings alone: instead, as Scott Barnett and Casey Boyle argue in *Rhetoric Through Everyday Things*, rhetorical action includes the “vibrant ecology of things as occasioning possibilities for rhetoric and writing” (11). Although I often use *techno* to refer to digital, online spaces and the tools that make those spaces possible, the term also acknowledges the wide range of constantly merging (and diverging) materialities that are digital, environmental, physical, natural, etc. As Judy Wajcman describes in *TechnoFeminism*, technology itself is always a sociomaterial product, “a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organizations, cultural meanings and knowledge” (106). Technofeminist and cyberfeminist perspectives such as Wajcman's demonstrate that we live in co-existence with tools that effect and shape our language, ideologies, and cultural values (Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley). Understandings of our responsibility to one another are always embedded, circulated, and framed within a set of material conditions that we negotiate and live within.

Let me start to explain how and why I bring the social relational together with the technical, so that I can start building toward the deeper arguments of the chapters to follow.

### **Considering Ethics and Technical Mediation Together**

Historically, ethical concerns have always had a role within rhetorical studies (as I expand on in Chapter 1), but within our current cultural context, communication depends on various

technologies, literacies, modalities, environments, platforms<sup>1</sup>, and media that invite new questions and considerations for how we define and practice ethics. Within our composition classes we must now grapple with questions of ethics particularly as they surround online research and social media use. Research, pedagogies, and textbooks have worked to address such forms of digital communication by expanding concepts of literacy to incorporate multimodality so as to examine the linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and aural modes of our communication. Beginning with the New London Group, multimodal design has been posited as part of the “civic responsibility required in our increasingly globalised, networked, and digitized social environments” (61). While an emphasis on multimodality opens possibilities for understanding the layout and interface of a website, it leaves few options for addressing the invisible and often automated coding and infrastructure work underlying our networks and digital tools. When websites are analyzed using multimodal approaches, we may miss larger contextual (and what I will later explain as *mediational*) concerns of the technologies being used and how technology’s infrastructure positions users.

For an example of analysis that focuses solely on the interface, consider “Community Guides,” by Vie, Valzhiser, and Ralston. The authors use critical discourse analysis to investigate the effects of community guidelines for users of the sites Reddit, Jezebel, and Youtube. Their article attends to how design and community guidelines affect users’ engagement in fat-shaming and other forms of harassment. After a thorough analysis of discussion board conversations, the authors conclude that the community guides may have some small influence on controlling uncivil discourse but that they were overall less than determinative. Additionally, the authors suggest that—from a design perspective—comment lists (as opposed to threads) may

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<sup>1</sup> By platform, I refer to the environment that a software runs: For social media, that is typically a web browser or a phone application.

offer a tighter control of discourse since “threaded comments guide communities toward more open participation and more conversational responses” (33). While I agree with the authors that it is unlikely that community guides would largely influence or encourage users’ civility, especially since it’s likely that few users read community guides, I wonder if such a constrained contextual framework—that is, analysis limited to discourse and multimodality alone—may impede a more robust consideration of social media ethics. There are, after all, several other concerns that factor into communication on social media sites, including how the coding and algorithms developed by programmers allow for platforms that are, for the most part, autonomous and capable of working outside direct human oversight.

As I will develop in later chapters, I argue that bringing an understanding of TSR to our analysis offers at least one response to the constraints of multimodal rhetorical analyses: We are invited into deeper considerations of the effects of medium/media and mediation<sup>2</sup>. Following from the New London Group, *medium* is most often understood as the means to deliver information to an audience. In guides such as *Writer/Designer*, medium is defined as “the way in which a text reaches an audience” (14). In Cynthia Selfe’s *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, medium is defined as the “technology on which—and the technological systems through which—information is delivered or stored: computers, drawing paper, photographic paper, television, CDs, DVDs.” (195). Medium, then, within multimodal rhetoric, is generally believed to be the static and unchanging structure that participates in delivering and storing information for the eyes, ears, and minds of other humans. Under these definitions, an online blog is a medium that can be navigated in a number of ways, but the blog is thus a form that

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<sup>2</sup> The word “mediation” is central to this dissertation and refers to an activity in which humans (bodies and values) and technologies co-construct each other. I mention this here because I need to start using the term quickly — but in Chapter 2 I trust that a more complete understanding of the terms will become clear.

contains the information and remains relatively still, even if the information within may be revised, added to, deleted, etc.

More recently, multimodal studies have moved from these more static understanding of media to consider the more dynamic act of mediation, of how, that is, our media are never static but are woven into—changed by and changing—our communications. For example, Shipka’s mediated action framework in *Toward a Composition Made Whole* understands all activity as enabled and concentrated by mediational means and the cultural tools employed. Shipka’s mediation focuses on humans’ relationships with technologies that are both external (like a computer or hammer) and internal (like a human solving a math problem) (43-46). Other approaches such as Alexander and Rhodes’s “thick network” and Queen’s “feminist-informed rhetorical genealogy” encourage analysis that attends to processes of digital circulation and how circulation effects ideologies and affect. My approach to mediation follows from this scholarship in that it attends to the active and dynamic processes that surround our digital tools; however, rather than centering solely on human-to-human relationships or even human-to-tool-to-human relationships, TSR also attends to the relationship of our technologies with other technologies and critiques the infrastructure that enables platform technologies to exist. To illustrate how such concerns may be integrated into rhetorical analysis, I return to the essay “Community Guides,” attending to the language used in the concluding paragraphs. To end their essay, Vie, Valzhiser, and Ralston move from concerns of trolling and harassment on community guides to address broader questions about the relationship of users to their social media technologies. They write:

[I]t would seem that while technology and policies might shape discourse, social sites are more like utility companies than agents of discourse and thought control. They provide a



telephone line, so to speak, and it is often of no matter to them, within limits of the law, what happens there. (35)

While I agree with the authors that social media are often viewed as utility companies by users, what gives me pause is the claim that, given this line of thinking, these platforms are less capable of acting as “agents of discourse and thought control.” Such a positioning is problematic because it situates technologies as passive or neutral, failing to account for their influence as agents. Furthermore, this conclusion isolates issues of design from mediation and thus from the larger scope of infrastructure within social media operates. While I do not intend to move into a full analysis of these platforms here (Chapter 3 offers such analysis), I do want to push Vie, Valzhiser, and Ralston’s conclusions further in light of mediation analysis: if our interactions on these platforms seems similar to those we have with a phone or cable company, it is not because social media is completing the same work as a utility company; rather the sites’ developers have encouraged such an imagining of user-relationality through the design, organization, and automation of the site itself. If social sites and the companies that run them have strived to appear neutral, apolitical, and impartial, it is because this relationship with users allows developers a relatively hands-off approach, distanced from the social, cultural, and political ramifications that arise from the technologies they develop. In the case of the harassment studied in “Community Guides,” while developers may create a set of guidelines for engagement on their sites, in most instances they choose not to engage, create judgements, or blame in order to uphold those guidelines; instead they sit back, to continue an illusion of neutrality.

If we were to ask who benefits in equating social media to a utility company, one possible answer is to point to how the owners and developers of such sites enjoy the privilege—including financial compensation—that comes with disengagement. Yet as the circumstances

surrounding the 2016 election—such as the increased circulation of misinformation, the use of advertising to promote propaganda, and the creation of fake accounts to foster political division—have demonstrated, social media does have effects and outcomes that we have a responsibility to thoroughly and ethically investigate (Levin). Our relationships with others and understanding of ourselves are now threaded within a networked landscape—and yet we are asked to pay little attention to any network’s ethical effects when we compose and interact on these platforms. For example, what is the price we pay as users to store and share our information freely (in both senses) online? Who owns our accounts and the content we compose on them? What about questions of privacy and surveillance that surround these sites?

Without attending to the ethical role of our material and technical realities, we will only ever have partial and disjointed rhetorical knowledge distanced from the new moral questions that arise with the capacities of our technology. This dissertation argues that a rhetorical approach to technology is not enough: we must also fold ethical mediations of techno-material centrally into the consideration. By techno-material, a new term on which I expand in Chapter 2, I refer to how our technologies are always a part of our material world and thus have capacities outside of our own human-centric control.

### **Notes on the Particular Focus of this Dissertation**

Before I outline the upcoming chapters, let me add one note, concerning why this dissertation focuses on one particular form of digital technology, that of social media.

For three semesters I piloted a Writing and Research course (the second course in University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s First-Year Composition sequence) that focused on integrating social media into the first-year writing class through a TSR approach. Over that time, I grew familiar with students’ perspectives, questions, and concerns surrounding social media

use. Those who entered my course appear aware of the many shortcomings of the social media they use. They scoff at the intensity of the advertising, at the expansive array of bullshit content, and at the trolls and the frequency that trolls flood these spaces. Students seem to view social media as a necessary but broken technology. Students have also shared real concerns for the many risks and ethical implications that come with social media use and its effect on their day to day lives. As one student shared, “Social media scare[s] the hell out of me....” and “The way the websites are set up is so addicting, it’s just scary.”

Despite these negative feelings, students also recognize how meaningful tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat are to their day-to-day lives. They enjoy and have gratitude for being connected with others, especially family and friends who are geographically distanced. Social media to them is not only about maintaining relations but is also about making new findings about the self and the self’s relationship to the world. For example, platforms like Twitter help them stay up to date on current news, events, and topics that matter to them. In liking, reacting to, and following certain stories, they see themselves as saying to others “Here is a part of me. This is how I identify. This is what I believe.” Social media, then, offers a means to experiment with ideas of the self and navigate issues of identity, making it valuable for personal, professional, and political advocacy.

In the pilot courses, students often reflected on their own social media advocacy. All too often, they brought up their past experiences struggling to navigate the tough ethical questions that surfaced as they composed online—questions they themselves had no way to answer and no specific place to turn to for help or advice. For example, one student walked up to me after we discussed online corporate surveillance to confess that she was concerned she had provided sensitive information to a third-party application just before the semester had started without

realizing it. Several of the women in my class discussed how popular Instagram influencers caused them to have anxiety about their diet, their physical appearance, and the money they had to spend on clothes. One student told me she specifically selected my class because she wanted more opportunities to think through the effects of social media on her life. As we grew to know one another, she shared that she was cyber-bullied in high school so much that her parents decided to homeschool her. She has since quit all her social media accounts. Another student decided to focus his research project on how social media affects one's professional life. The reason? Over the summer his employer—a popular food chain—asked him to take down a tweet in which he described a racist interaction with a customer. The student described in his writing how a man came in and refused to be served by the student because of the student's race. Rather than asking the customer to leave, the food chain provided another server. Out of frustration, the student tweeted about his experience. After his employer found out, he was told to delete or he would be fired.

From cyber-bullying to consumer pressure, to trouble with privacy and corporate surveillance, so much of students' public lives as composers involved their social media use. We can no longer afford to teach composition as we always have: as though writing and research existed in a world void of social media technologies and as though machine agencies have not changed the communicative labor of our social world.

These stories also reveal the *need for* but *lack of* meaningful social media in education. Currently, there are few options for students to seriously and critically analyze social media as a text, to reflect on their own social media practices, and to learn about how these technologies work, especially from the perspective of someone who is a non-expert (as in, not a computer programmer or engineer). My aim in developing a TSR approach is to help fill this gap by

developing an analytical process that takes seriously techno-material agencies and their capacity to participate in the creation, maintenance, and fracturing of our social relationships. A layered approach creates new opportunities for rhetorical theory to account for ethical agency and responsibility.

### **Defining a Techno-Social Relational Approach: An Overview**

In this dissertation, I define techno-social relationality (TSR) as an interlayered approach of rhetorical analysis that attends to communication with/for/to/among machines and tools as much as with/for/to/among humans. More particularly, TSR brings feminist-informed ethics to the fore in analyzing networked, digital texts. As an interlayered approach to analysis, TSR challenges static notions of texts that are imagined to be composed by a singular, autonomous author, so that we can attend to the collective effects of human and non-human agents in our communicative practices. Rather than viewing the tools and media we compose with/for/to as value neutral, TSR considers the relational effects (the mediations) of humans, media, machines, networks, and material circumstances and how they affect the production, circulation, and understanding of a text.

Collectively, the four chapters of this dissertation lay the foundation for future writing pedagogies that will more intensively consider the persuasive and ethical consequences of our technologies. One of the main challenges is defining ethics to account for the coexistence of social and material contexts. To address this challenge, I establish in Chapter 1 a theoretical foundation for defining ethics informed by feminist theory. Following the rich history of feminist rhetorical approaches and in particular from Judith Butler's theory of ethics, I argue that a notion of social relational ethics must *precede* productive rhetorical action. Chapter 2 turns specifically to the ethical realm of digital technologies to define an approach of TSR that extends and focuses

on the foundational ethical work of Chapter 1. By calling for closer attention to the interwoven nature of mediation with subjectivity, Chapter 2 works to dispel myths of technological determinism and the two-world problem of subject/object binaries that invite us, as Robin Kinross states, to “take refuge in immaculate black machine casings” (30). In Chapter 2, I argue that it is urgent for rhetoricians to attend to how material composing circumstances—including online spaces and the tools we use to access them—shape the possibility for ethical relations. In Chapter 3, I define a rhetorical approach of TSR that emphasizes how relationality, the most important ethical grounding, ought to be understood as taking place online in an inseparable blend of the technical and the social. I follow the description of this approach with two examples of a TSR analysis on two different social media sites: Facebook and Pinterest. The analyses consider the values these social media sites have been designed to support, the visible and invisible ways they circulate information, and how their interfaces structure and define social relations. Throughout Chapter 3, I also consider the relationship of material production and consumption with the process of crafting an online identity within existing networks, economies, and systems of surveillance.

Chapter 4 explicitly turns to the pedagogical implications of TSR. Here, I lay the foundation for the composition pedagogies I would like to see implemented in writing classes. Drawing from observations in three semesters of a pilot course, I scaffold Chapter 4 by providing sample prompts, activities, and assignments that ask students to analyze techno-material relationships and consider how they may productively disrupt or resist the paths technologies encourage through students’ own creative practices. For instance, students might track what is automated for them as they participate and compose on particular sites or they might examine

how information (such as a news story or meme) is disseminated, shared, and transformed across social media for different audiences and purposes.

My aim through this work is to demonstrate that, if we are to take seriously the agential capabilities of our materials—and thus their capacity to create, maintain, and fracture relationships—rhetoric must move beyond the tactics used in multimodal analysis in order to develop new ways of listening to materials around us. In *Moralizing Technology*, Peter-Paul Verbeek remarks on our current techno-social merging, claiming that this “blurring of the boundaries between humans and technologies does not make humans less responsible; rather, it opens up a new realm of responsibility” (108). TSR offers an approach for attending to this new realm of responsibility and thus creates new opportunities for rhetorical theory to account for moral agency and civil responsibility.

## Chapter One: Framing Ethical Concerns as Social Relational and Material

The murmuring background soundtrack to all our work sings that it is ethics, it is always ethics, within every reddened marginal correction we make, every request for another draft, every discussion about the social embeddedness and articulations of writing and composing. It is all about ethics in the oldest sense because we are trying, with those actions, to shape what we are to value—and how then we are to act-together, together as people who live in the same places or at least in some set of overlapping years.

—Anne Wysocki, “It is Not Only Ours” (282)

General questions, like “what do we do?” always land us within the realm of ethics ...

—Krista Ratcliff, *Rhetorical Listening* (76)

### Introduction

Ethics itself has always been entwined with rhetorical concerns. As Wysocki’s CCCC article “It is Not Only Ours” reminds us, our attempts to teach and to theorize communication are always attempts to shape what we are to value (282). Teaching writing, then, is inseparable from teaching ethics. Such understanding is also in line with what Berlin argued years ago: teaching writing is always “teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (268). When we teach students about writing, we invite them to navigate their social worlds and to know those worlds more thoroughly. And writing itself is always a process of knowing: knowing what ought to be said, knowing how to say it, and, then, knowing what to do (or not to do). *Ethics* encompasses all of this.

When ethics is discussed in relation to teaching rhetoric, it’s often connected to ideologies that value persuasion as a tool for advocacy—for navigating and making choices in order for one to shape the world. From this view, rhetorical knowledge (that is, the study of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis) is correlated with rhetorical agency (the ability to do things or to take communicative actions that lead to intended consequences). The existence of or possibility



of rhetorical agency is one justification for rhetorical study in first-year writing courses, so it's not unusual to see this view in our composition textbooks. For example, Garrett Longaker and Jeffrey Walker's textbook *Rhetorical Analysis* describes rhetoric as a necessary part of human interaction and analysis and so as the "essential equipment for daily survival" (1). Rhetoric is said to provide a counter to force or violence while allowing one to be a better advocate and a better judge (3).

In the last few decades, feminist rhetorical scholarship has expanded the realm of rhetoric to respect and account for a more inclusive interpretation of rhetorical knowledge. As Lindal Buchanan and Kathleen Ryan describe, part of feminist rhetorical work is "interrogating foundational disciplinary concepts—such as rhetorical space, argument, genre, and style—in order to expand and, when necessary, redefine the realm of rhetoric" (xvi). And while in early scholarship, feminists rhetoricians worked to add to and critique traditional models of rhetoric, Shari Stenberg in *Repurposing Composition* explains that, as such work has grown, it has moved to do both at once—therefore "alter[ing] the very conception of rhetoric" (18).

Some feminists have focused on prioritizing skills of listening. For instance, Krista Ratcliff's concept of "rhetorical listening" emphasizes a "stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges" (17). Listening, usually positioned as feminine or passive in communication, is reframed as an active ethical opportunity. Ratcliff also urges a view of personal accountability that prioritizes social-relationality. As Ratcliff writes,

[A]ccountability signifies recognizing that none of us lives autonomous lives, despite the grand narrative of U.S. individualism. Accountability means that we are indeed members of the same village, and if for no other reason than that (and there are other reasons), all people necessarily have a stake in each other's quality of life. (31)

Likewise, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's 1995 essay "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for Invitational Rhetoric" develops the concept of invitational rhetoric in order to revise traditional patriarchal definitions of persuasion rooted in bias characterized as a combative, winner-take-all approach.

Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* describes this altering as a rhetorical *assaying*, adapted from the action of mining for precious metals. Rhetorical assaying involves (1) using feminist practices as tools to examine rhetorical contexts, performances, impacts, and consequences and (2) forming and reforming the rhetorical patterns of assessment, interpretation, and critique (16). Feminist rhetorical assaying, as Royster and Kirsch write, "focus[es] questions persistently on the adequacy of our own actions and judgements, rather than questioning more unidirectionally and without reflexivity the quality and value of our subjects and their performances" (16). The introspective qualities that make up rhetorical assaying encourage a counterpoint for persuasion and the judgement of persuasion that, historically, were most often given precedence over more yielding-oriented processes necessary for ethical communication. In fact, across feminist rhetorical scholarship, there is persistently less emphasis on the assessment of persuasion and far more interest in moving toward actions of self-reflection, listening, understanding, and making space for what cannot be known. It is this counter-balance that I want to emphasize in defining social-relational ethics.

In this chapter, I turn the focus away from the realm of rhetoric specifically, if only for a moment, in order to further explore the ethical values underlying feminist theory and feminist rhetorical scholarship: According to feminists, what defining values ensure or move us toward making an ethical composing choice as opposed to one that is less ethical? And what are the

processes, conditions, or attributes that allow for ethical action (particularly in relationship to rhetorical agency)? To begin a response to these questions, I turn to Judith Butler's theory of ethics in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

### **Butler's Feminist Ethics**

*Giving an Account of Oneself* describes how we might live ethically within the complex (and often vexed) social and linguistic conditions of our shared lives with others. Butler's approach to ethics resonates in particular with feminist-focused rhetorical approaches since it prioritizes *relationality* and *accountability*. In brief, *relationality*, as I refer to feminist theory, encompasses the direct and indirect relations we consciously and unconsciously form with others. A focus on relationality in ethics turns the question of responsibility away from the idea that there are established right or wrong choices or even that an individual might make right or wrong choices; instead, a focus on relationality engages with the more complex social structures involved in ethical decision-making, especially with how those structures lead to (or work against) violence and injustice. Ethical work understood from a *relational* perspective is contingent in that it is less concerned with establishing 'pure' facts, upper-case 'T' truth, or a set of unwavering principles of right from wrong. Relationally-informed ethics overlap with concerns of rhetoric since both involve deliberations that do not have a firm, definite, or unavoidable answer.

Relational ethics does not mean that there is no longer need for accountability, but it does mean that how we define accountability transforms in that there is no easy, one-size-fits-all response to what form it takes. This change in view can be found in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, where Butler softens the expression "to give an account," and in doing so resists its typical associations with a judicial context where one is accused of a crime and must offer a plea to a jury or other social collective who will determine the verdict. Rather than such a focus on

judgement, accountability refers to one's responsibility to adopt a compassionate and collectively-informed stance of knowing that maintains that how well we communicate and how well we listen determines the wellbeing of all human life. In this light, accountability or "providing an account" is just as much about the social and cultural conditions that surround communication as it is about communication in and of itself. According to Butler, we may become "accountable" by developing a social, temporal, and spacial context that would allow for non-violent communication and listening to exist and thrive for all.

Before expanding on what such a context might require, I turn to a more fundamental question about defining ethics with a feminist lens: what determines the possibilities for becoming ethically accountable or for demanding ethical accountability from others? Or, using Butler's language as she borrows from Nietzsche, how are we *recognized* as accountable and how do we *become recognized* by others' sense of accountability?

At the most basic level, *recognition* involves human sensory perception or how our senses allow us to invite a response or respond to another. Our senses enable us to say "I see you" or "I hear you" or even "I can imagine you" as a human face to which I am obligated to respond. More simply, our senses provide us with the possibility of determining the presence of another. At a deeper level, recognition involves understanding oneself (and/or others) as a *subject*—that is, as someone with personal experiences and identities and a distinct consciousness. Butler, referencing Foucault, emphasizes that as subjects we are always made up of a series of overlapping and at times conflicting identities (mother, teacher, sister, runner, film fanatic, scholar, etc.) and that these identities are formed through adapting *norms*, or the social patterns that guide and direct human behavior.

Much of Butler's most notable scholarship critiques how social norms determine categories of gender and sexuality, yet norms may be expressed through a number of different cultural markers and ideological interpretations (of gender, sex, age, diet, religious background, educational experiences, clothing choices, etc.). And while we can work to become conscious of norms, describe them, and even challenge them (I will return to this later on), they are most often adopted subconsciously, so we will always lack a complete awareness of how they came to exist for us in the first place. Furthermore, since norms are always socially and historically constructed by and through people we don't know, at times when we weren't alive, and at places we never visited, there is no possibility for any firm or agreed upon origin story for how our norms came to be culturally significant in the first place. There is, after all, no exhaustive archive or collective human memory that can capture the historical context of a particular social norm. So, while we require norms in order to be recognized as a subject, we never fully understand their context: or in other words, norms always *precede* our recognition. We step into an already existing social world of norms and can only become recognizable through the boundaries and allowances that they determine.

It's important to realize, for the purpose of this chapter, that norms structure us morally just as they do socially, influencing what we consider to be a good (or bad) decision or a noble (or corrupt) type of identity. Norms also limit how we recognize others, giving us boundaries to navigate who is worthwhile, those to whom we are willing or able to devote time and attention, and how we are able to extend love; norms also determine who (and what) is considered unworthy or outside of social parameters of care. The latter point brings up one of the juxtapositions of norms important to Butler's ethics: just as norms are required for recognition and morality, they also have the potential to be so confining that they lead to destruction and

violence—especially if they force a specific moral framework in situations where it is no longer applicable. When a rigid or inflexible sense of right from wrong is enforced, it opens the possibility for various forms of violence.

By violence here, I mean both physical violence but also the less obvious types of violence that can occur through silencing or otherwise disregarding the voices of others. Since it may be difficult to imagine these effects in an abstract sense or outside of a specific social situation, I turn to a real-world example and examine the particular ethical context and norms that influence an anti-abortion stance.

Becoming critical about the topic of abortion first requires examining the gendered and religious norms that allow for women to be recognizable as subjects. For the Christian-right, this recognition takes place primarily through a valuing of a woman's nurturing qualities, especially in terms of her capacity to serve a husband, through (for example) giving birth and caring for his children. These norms constrain a woman's possible identities in that a woman may only be recognizable (and therefore worthy of love) based on how able she is to serve and continue a man's genetic family lineage. There is little possibility for those who have been conditioned by such norms and have identities rooted in their perseverance to acknowledge or recognize a more diverse range of identities a woman may hold. As a result, the Christian religious and patriarchal ideologies at the root of these norms place certain pressures and restrictions on who is deemed an acceptable woman worthy of love and respect and who is not. These ideologies also influence the norms surrounding birth or the capacity to give birth: birth itself is viewed as a holy gift from God to be valued above all else, including above the bodies and lives of women. Women, for example, might be expected to give birth (or attempt to) even if the process puts their lives at stake or the pregnancy itself is a result of incest or rape. Rigid moral structures become justified

and reinforced through such gender norms, resulting in violence against women if they are forced to endure a pregnancy to its full term despite any psychological and/or physical consequences. If a woman chooses to resist these gender norms and choose abortion then she risks being viewed as unworthy of love and she risks being ostracized from the social collective through which she was formed as a subject—she can thus become unrecognizable, which in turn invites further violence against her.

The violence women endure during complicated pregnancies is often justified based on another value of the religious right: that is, that the lives and minds of men are more important, significant, or valuable than those of women. Collectively these values—that women are only useful for how well they nurture, that pregnancy as an invaluable gift from God, and that men are unquestionably superior to women—serve to reinforce violent actions against women while at the same time silencing women and restricting the possibilities for women to advocate for themselves and to make choices that best serve their interests. When norms become so constrained and so entrenched in social patterns that they lock individuals into a particular way of being and do so without space for critical reflection (as with “these commands are God’s commands”) then the inventive capacity of norms that allow us to become recognizable as subjects becomes overshadowed by their capacity for violence.

With this real-world example in mind and the pressing life and death consequences that such an example brings up within the current political climate, it may be tempting to take a more pessimistic, even deterministic, outlook of the world: if these norms are in place and people are determined by them, what room is there for change or transformation? It’s important to keep in mind, especially when such doubts arise, that the identities through and by which we are formed aren’t so fixed that social change is impossible. When I say *change* here, I’m not referring to

changes in law but instead to changes in what our sociality enables or disallows. After all, in returning to the above example, it's important to recognize that legalizing abortion by law does not stop all the forms of violence and injustice against women that are tied to abortion as an issue, since the ideologies and norms continue to inform how people identify and thus form an understanding of one's identity and self-worth. *Change* as I refer to it throughout this chapter refers to how new norms allow for the creation of new identities that can be socially recognizable and deemed worthy of accountability.

As rhetoricians, we understand keenly how discourse constructs norms. Discourse limits who is recognizable, who is heard (or deemed worthy of being heard), and who is ignored. Discourse also structures those to whom we extend generosity: Is what they say hearable to me? Can I infer they mean well? Are their inconsistencies or failures ones I recognize or can forgive? Am I satisfied—despite gaps or places of unknowing—in their narrative? Rhetorical study also reveals how, although our world is limited by discursively-situated norms, that doesn't mean we have no making, acting, speaking and writing that isn't ours or that offers no possibility for change. Rhetoric matters because our composing is what makes it possible to rupture, revise, and contest existing structures, even if how we do so is always situated by the social norms through which we have been constructed. There is space for directing agency.

Yet, pinpointing the moment of change, revision, or transformation through our composing and discourse is not easy. More accurately, it is almost impossible. After all, if we return to the question of agency and accountability (addressed earlier in the chapter) and believe accountability is indeed distributed, we also acknowledge that change doesn't happen through the special talents of a sole individual or their words but instead is always situated in the historical and social relations we form with others. So here we have a double-edged sword: we



need to communicate in order to enact change, yet no sole subject has the possibility to enact change (by change, again I mean developing new norms that expand who is recognizable and accountable) through their communication.

Butler suggests that it is possible to create change by challenging norms, revising them, and forming new ones. And in fact, she argues we must believe that our social world is malleable if we are to act ethically (this I will return to later). Yet while we may more clearly see change when one particular time and social context is juxtaposed to another (consider for example the idealization of the 1950's housewife versus the 1980's power woman), it is harder to trace how change is happening/happens/can happen in the present moment. And it can be challenging to imagine what possibilities we have in shaping the world given how much current social structures value autonomy and individual choice over relationality and accountability. So often we have a tendency to over-invest in fantasies about individual agency, or in the idea that a single individual can form change through their actions, without examining the structures that support or deter desired change. Tales of the individual genius or innovator who makes dramatic change can become too overwhelming—even paralyzing—for us. It is a heavy burden for an individual to bear the weight of the world's repeated injustices. To over-invest in fantasies about individual ego with the agency to change and to witness, or to feel failure in oneself for lacking the ability to make such gains, are both ethical liabilities in that they impair a recognition and respect for how we are all socially-bound and socially-dependent and, as I will explain, socially-transformable.

If we were to abandon these stories of individual autonomy, what possibilities for transformation might be opened? What is our responsibility in challenging existing norms? How do we revise our social structures and do so in pursuit of inclusivity and equality (both feminist

aims)? And importantly, how can we explore these questions while not leaning on answers that encourage a continuing or creating of new cycles of violence? What are ways that we may respond to corrupt or unfair social structures, rather than reacting and perhaps creating further injustice? Butler's ethics begins an answer to such questions by focusing on how our own "unknowing" makes way for ethical social change to be possible.

If, as I've described, there is no history or position from which we can fully uncover or realize how we have adapted norms and their origins, then part of living as a human subject means dwelling in our own unknowing. Despite this unknowing, there is still a possibility to become further conscious of the ways norms guide our lives just as much as there is a possibility to recognize that we simply will not ever know everything. Butler describes our unknowing as a form of "dispossession," referring to how we are always dispossessed from our own origin story; recognizing this dispossession means also recognizing that we are never fully of our own making: no human has the ability to fully articulate who they are, why they are, or how they are since the whole is always ungraspable and outside of themselves. We are furthest dispossessed from those norms that are adapted subconsciously, since it is more challenging to question, critique, or remain reflexive about alternative possibilities when everything about the social world in which we participate recirculates and reproduces existing values.

Our unknowing of these things, however, does not excuse responsibility. Instead, a recognition of our own unknowing necessitates the need to become critical. Becoming critical, for Butler, means to examine how the presentation of ourselves is always structured and limited by time, context, and available discourse. It also means developing an awareness of our own unsolvable hypocrisies, faults, inconsistencies, and weaknesses. To admit our unknowing and to become critical are both stances that allow us, as Butler argues, to see the ways that we are

limited and, through this recognition, to see how others too face those same limits of knowing. In other words, we can more readily accept others' own unknowing and the various consequences that follow from that. As Butler writes:

My own opacity to myself [dispossession] occasions my capacity to infer a certain kind of recognition of others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as how one presents oneself in the available discourse might imply, in turn, a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be self-same at every moment. Suspending the demand for self-identity or ... complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity as all times and require others to do the same. (42)

Given our dispossession, there is no way to not feel at times foreign to oneself or to feel incoherent. What we do have, and perhaps what we may all find relief in, is the ability to maintain an open-ended, unsatisfiable questioning of the self and of the self's relations with others. And if reflexivity provides us one way to see how we are never fully-knowing, then it also reveals to us our own fallibility and the fallibility of the norms through and by which we are formed. We lose the possibility for any form of individual-as-ethical-ideal (since no individual is all-knowing in this way), but in this failure, we gain the possibility to extend *generosity* and thus positions of uncertainty, inconsistencies, wonder, and unknowing.

In this light, then, ethics depends less on what we know or what stabilizes us and more on how unknowing makes room for generosity.

The inability to become critical and admit our own unknowing is why challenging, confronting, or resisting social structures is often met with so much resistance: there is a

resistance to change generally, yes, but more specifically this resistance is rooted in how change challenges the comfortable hegemony that has allowed others, especially those privileged by the current structure, to see, to be seen, and to make sense of themselves. It is very human to cling to and defend the structures through and with which we have established our identity. And it is challenging to see the faults, especially in systemic norms, since witnessing these shortcomings means challenging the structures that have allowed us to become recognizable, worthy, and loved. Seeing our own weaknesses is necessary. And while there are certainly neoliberal rationales that understand weakness as a meaningful place for “self-improvement” or toward some imaginative ideal, Butler offers another stance: that weaknesses make us necessarily *vulnerable* and provide us with necessary opportunities to *yield*. *Vulnerability* in this context means setting oneself up for risk of injury, discursive or otherwise, but it also means seeing oneself as having the possibility to injure. Vulnerability also means to fear. Being open to vulnerability means to resist the urge to cling more forcefully to how one’s identities are being disrupted or challenged within a particular social encounter (a clinging that so often ends in violence) and instead to lean into vulnerability and to understand it as a necessary part of all human well-being. It is through the conditions of social-relational ethics—conditions that begin with accepting vulnerability—that transformation becomes possible. We need conditions of vulnerability in order for rhetorical exchange to be possible. From this position, it is not that ethics follows from rhetorical work, but rather that recognizing our own vulnerability means realizing we are capable of—and receptive to—error and betrayal, even despite our best intentions to do otherwise. We become vulnerable when we admit or realize that some of our identities encourage violence against those who are not like us. Of course, there is always a risk with vulnerability, since it means we must accept that we and our social world are less than

stable and less than certain. Acknowledging vulnerability means we cannot freeze the world and the self within it into a comfortable and unchanging concept of morality. However, this is a necessary risk: accepting moral responsibility is only possible when we accept the inevitability of injury, of pain, of betrayal, and error and when we acknowledge that we and those around us are flawed. Within rhetorical terms, admitting vulnerability means acknowledging that (as much as we depend on our human tools of speech, of composing, of our discourse) our communicative tools are flawed and imperfect constructions.

*Yielding* is the action of relinquishing control. It means being given over to the other and offering or inviting the other the possibility to influence. Rhetorically speaking, yielding means providing another person room to speak or otherwise provide their account. As Butler reminds us, “persuasion is not possible without yielding to another’s words” (125). Yielding means hearing others and ensuring that there is space for such hearing to happen. The more we make way for vulnerability, the more it becomes possible for us to yield to another—to listen more carefully and with patience to the other's words or action. Collectively, vulnerability and yielding are required for ethics since they allow us to view our relationships with others as gifts rather than entitlements. In our own vulnerability and yielding, we may navigate relations with intentions of mutual respect and transparency as opposed to force, trickery, or violence. A social-relational ethics requires the risk and vulnerability of a speaker as much as it requires the passivity and yielding of an audience. The crux of ethical possibility—and therefore a possibility for rhetorical effectiveness (as opposed to effectiveness through force or violence)—comes down to actions of *vulnerability* and *yielding* in speaker-audience relations.

I want to return once more to the idea of social change and how it may occur, so that I might reiterate that change can never occur through a single person’s autonomous choices;

rather, change happens in how we collectively listen and respond and it happens in response to those we deem worthy of listening and responding to. And while one is always transformed in some way through a communicative act, challenging pre-existing norms is only possible through a collective sense of accountability. It is only through recrafting ourselves with and for another—through rhetorical means—that we may establish the inertia to participate in the ethical remaking of oppressive and systemic social conditions. When new voices and perspectives are deemed worthy of love, then opportunities to express a fuller and authentic account of lived experiences become possible. Ethical communication means communicating to disrupt systemic norms in order to honor change motivated by feminist aims of inclusion and social justice.

## **Conclusion**

I began with questions: What guiding values ensure or move us toward ethical composing choices as opposed to the less ethical, according to feminists? And what are the processes, conditions, or attributes that allow for ethical action (particularly in relationship to rhetorical agency)? To answer these questions and conclude this chapter, I have developed a list of conditions, following from Butler's ethics, that I will refer to as *social-relational ethics* throughout.

When taken together, feminist-informed ethics are grounded in the following conditions:

We should always seek to

- (1) Critique the norms into which we are born (self-reflexivity);
- (2) Acknowledge the limitations of discourse, or the limitations we have in communicating through existing social and linguistic conventions (humility);
- (3) Cultivate a self-acceptance about the limits of our knowingness (vulnerability);
- (4) Acknowledge the limits of others (generosity);

- (5) Preserve a certain passivity in social exchange that allows for listening, especially in times of difference (yielding);
- (6) Maintain a charitableness for what we do not know and for what others do not know (patience);
- (7) Strive intentionally toward honesty and truth—while recognizing our own fallibility (transparency);
- (8) Recraft ourselves with and for one another as opposed to through violence, force, or trickery (responsibility)

Social-relational ethics, understood in these terms, challenges the autonomous *subject* popularized within Western thought by constructing an ethics wherein individuals understand themselves as less self-made or self-governing and as more conscious of dependence on human-to-human relationality. The conditions are also important rhetorically since they provide a framework from which rhetorical work can happen. In other words, from a feminist view, ethical relationality is not a result of but is rather a precondition for rhetorical work.

### **A Last Contextual Note...**

I have one last note on feminist rhetorical theory before the close of this chapter: there are a number of feminist rhetoricians whose work resonates with, informs, and/or is informed by Butler's ethical theory that I could have folded into this chapter. I have chosen not to because I wanted to emphasize and explain the conditions that ground feminist ethics. Those rhetoricians nonetheless deserve acknowledgement here.

First, the work of scholars of color has been invaluable in the theorization of feminist ethics. It impossible to move toward social-relational ideas of ethics without, for example, the writing of Audré Lorde, which has continued to inform contemporary rhetorical scholarship

while inspiring more inclusive models of thinking that attend to the intersection of sexism, racism, ageism, class, and homophobia. Lorde's 1984 book *Sister Outsider* highlights the potential of difference as a vehicle for action and change. As Lorde writes, "Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (111). The conditions for social-relational ethics would not be possible if it were not first established that difference—rather than being an obstacle to social transformation—was what made it possible.

It is also important, here, that I give credit to bell hooks, who describes the challenge of creating social transformation when one's identity is bound to institutions of oppression. hooks in particular critiques the tendency of white feminists (especially those educated in the United States) to strive for gender equality while failing to acknowledge the consequences of racism, historically and present. As hooks describes: "For how does one overthrow, change, or even challenge a system that you have been taught to admire, to love, to believe in?" (121). hooks's words are in the background of every call to critique the social norms one is born into.

There is also a significant body of feminist rhetorical scholarship that has called for attending to previously ignored rhetorical practices and thus broadened conceptions of discursive thought. For instance, in "Silence: A Politics," Kennan Ferguson critiques the cultural tendency to view silence as passive or simply a "lack of speech" or "indicative of miscommunication" (114). Silence from this perspective is not necessarily inaction but instead may be read as an act that can operate in multiple ways. As Ferguson writes of silence: "If it can be destructive, defensive, evocative of selves and social relations, then it can also contribute to the constitution of these identities" (121). Interpreting silence within the scope of rhetorical knowledge also



further efforts for social-relational ethics by acknowledging what is not said and whose voices are not heard.

Laura Micciche's *Doing Emotion* likewise reflects on the limitations of how discourse is defined. More specifically, Micciche argues that the subject of emotion be considered as worthy of critique and scholarship, despite its historical positioning as an obstacle to reason and successful argumentation. Important to social-relational ethics, Micciche's feminist-informed approach to emotion understands that emotions are always socially constructed as opposed to self-made and that they always take shape *between bodies* as opposed to being individually formed (13). Micciche's work is important to values of social-relational ethics as well: it is not simply that emotions are bad or create negligent bias. Instead, emotional responses are a necessary opportunity to develop further rhetorical awareness through reflection and self-reflexivity.

Feminist scholarship related to composition pedagogy (for example, Patricia Sullivan, Susan Jarratt, or Jacqueline Jones Royster) as well as writing program administration (for example, Carrie Leverenz, Marcia Dickson, or Hildy Miller) have also produced concepts that add to conversations of feminist ethics. While this scholarship does not always use the term "social-relational" or mention social-relational ethics, it informs and expands upon a trajectory of feminist-informed ethics that have made this chapter and the conditions named in it possible.

## Chapter Two: Ethical Mediations of Techno-Material

The question of action is a question then of how we inhabit space. Given this, action involves the intimate co-dwelling of bodies and objects.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (52)

Outrage will not and should not disappear, but a politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good.

—Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (xii)

Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering.

—Karen Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* (827)

### Introduction

In Chapter 1, I use Judith Butler's ethical theory to define an ethics of social relationality based on eight conditions: self-reflexivity, humility, vulnerability, generosity, yielding, patience, transparency, and responsibility. While these conditions draw attention to what is necessary if we are to be ethical listeners and composers, this chapter delves into how they are only a fragment—a very human-centered fragment—of a larger ethical picture. Our sociality, after all, does not occur within a vacuum of human relationality but always takes place within particular material and environmental circumstances (i.e.: among and through spaces, tools, technologies, natural phenomena, minerals, animals). Prioritizing ethics as human-centered and in terms of discursive practices such as reading and composing may generate ethical blind spots since it means failing to acknowledge how our social worlds are always spatially and materially-situated.

I often see human-centered ethical views when I first discuss social media technologies in my first-year writing courses. When I mention social media, the first reaction I get is usually an eyeroll. A mood sweeps over the class: “Oh no, not that.” There is a general irritation, an

annoyance that social media, whether we like it or not, a part of our lives. Overwhelmingly—and especially when the questions of ethics come up—students express apathy and fatigue over such technologies. When I pose more ethically-focused questions about responsibility of social media platforms themselves, students were often especially resistant to attributing blame to their technologies, preferring to point the finger at human actors. For example, in their early semester reflections, students have written:

In my opinion, when it comes to discussing the responsibility of social media platforms and how they should manage the issues, they shouldn't. ...I truly believe it is not up to the platforms themselves to hold responsibility...

In the end, social media outlets are not the ones to blame for the issues, it is all the users participating who are to blame.

I think that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter should do very little to "manage" the content that is posted.

So while my students were more than ready to acknowledge and discuss social media platforms as ethically fraught and even dangerous in some instances, they were less willing to call for such danger to be the blame of the technical systems. Instead they see agency and ethical accountability as being solely located in human choice. I believe these students' views speak to a larger cultural phenomenon: social media platforms are not held as ethically accountable. Our machines, more generally, are not often held as ethically accountable. In part, I believe this comes from how we imagine agency. On one hand, as my students' experiences reveal, we have a certain unwillingness to attribute agency to materiality, especially those materials that make up

our technologies. In Carolyn Miller's 2007 *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* article "What Can Automation Tell Us about Agency?," she writes that we often struggle to attribute agency to technology—especially if it threatens our own agency (152). Miller's article centers on computerized systems for automated assessment, but I don't think it is a stretch, especially considering my student's reflections, to extend such a conclusion to social media technologies.

Although there is resistance to attributing agency to technology, there is also a cultural tendency to view technology as having a dominating level of control over us. More specifically, it is popular to have very prescriptive attitudes toward technology that believe it to be completely outside of our control and thus always ethically-corrupt—or we have overly-optimistic views of techno-material that view technical innovation as a solution to everyone's problems (as I describe in more detail later in the chapter). I propose (and develop further in Chapter 3) that material-ethical concerns be brought to rhetorical knowledges about technology—particularly to how we think about mediation—in order to help us better center ethics in our analysis and production on social media platforms.

I specifically direct such attention to agency and ethics in social media because of the very real challenges that come with attempting to apply the eight feminist conditions of social relationality to digital composing environments. While feminists have called for prioritizing self-reflexivity and listening in rhetorical practice, such conditions within digital environments come with different challenges. (As I'm sure anyone who has tried to "rhetorically listen" to a comments thread on Facebook has come to realize.) Composing using social media tools means using tools that invite—even insist—that users participate as composers through repeated actions of sharing and producing, often at the expense of thoughtful listening and a nuanced understanding of an event outside of user's immediate knowing. Instead, composers on social

media are urged to “post what’s on our mind,” to “write a comment,” or to share a meme or click an advertisement. Through being urged in this way, our social media tools often invite composing that is designed to advertise, harass, and mislead as opposed to other communication practices associated with social relational ethics that demands accountability for what is read, composed, and circulated.

Social media technologies can also interfere with meeting the conditions for social-relationality because these platforms merge our personal and professional identities, turning complex people into brands. This was the case when Munroe Bergdorf, the first transgender model for L’Oréal, was dropped from their campaign after writing a critical Facebook post on race that concluded, “All white people are racist” (Craig). Considering Bergdorf is a black woman, L’Oréal’s reason that they fired her after the Facebook comment (because they aim to “champion diversity”) was ironic. But brands like L’Oréal prefer a “don’t rock the boat because that boat is carrying our money” approach, which often results in deeming marginalized voices inappropriate and unhearable. As revenue-based values oversee what public-facing social media content is granted as acceptable, they also have the power to delegitimize certain voices by cutting them.

The speed and breadth of information circulation on social media can also impact ethics by drowning out our ability to more fully understand one another: any communicative event becomes quickly merged and blurred into other contexts, which brings about different emphasis. This was the case after Trump’s criticism of NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s kneel, which was originally intended to protest police violence but was rewritten as a call for unity among players, coaches, and owners (Wyche). And we can see, more clearly now than we did in the months leading up to the election, how Russian propaganda campaigns took advantage of mediation

tools that value the speed of sharing information over what information is shared and why (Sydell). Too often, then, we ignore the techno-material conditions of our social media platforms that situation violence and influence our ability to become ethical.

To acknowledge the ethical accountability of materiality, we need to expand how we consider or think about mediation and agency.

I need to pause here to (start to) define "mediation." I have been using the term before this because it so encapsulates what I need readers to hear or imagine whenever we discuss humans and technologies together. As the previous paragraphs have argued, and as the next pages will also, technologies do not control us nor do we control them; instead, we co-create each other throughout our engagements. It is this "co-creation" I want you to have in mind whenever you see "mediation" in this text.

And we also have to consider how mediation—as in the relationship of technology to another technology or technology to another human—is agential. And while agency isn't the central question in this chapter, concerns of agency cannot be divorced from concerns of ethics since agency involves actions and interventions in the world.

In this chapter, I pick up on and develop the current rhetorical theorization of agency and materiality, with the aim of better understanding the ethical-mediations of *techno-material*. I use the phrase *techno-material* as a noun to describe the material realm of twenty-first century composing technologies, including the computers, networks, keyboards, phones, applications, algorithms, and code that are now so much a part of daily social interactions. By moving toward an ethical-mediation of techno-material, I hope to intervene in the technological myths so popular in our society that lead to prescriptive attitudes such as, for example, our technology always being completely outside of our control or, on the other hand, always within our control. I

begin by briefly describing recent theorization of agency within composition and rhetoric and how such concerns are in line with recent writing on materiality in composition. Then I describe the historic tendency to perceive technologies from deterministic ethical perspectives—that is, seeing technologies as determining our behaviors and actions. Afterward, I call for a recognition of techno-material agencies that avoids the pitfalls that come with assuming our technologies should not be held accountable or that they have complete control over human action. And finally, I bring together the Feminist New Materialist theory of Sara Ahmed, Jane Bennet, and Karen Barad in order to allow us to identify the ethical mediations of techno-material.

These mediations—ones that intersect but do not supersede the conditions for social-relational ethics—bring ethical awareness to material agencies. If, as I have argued, certain social-relational ethics must be in place as a precondition for rhetorical action, or at least ‘rhetorical action’ as defined by feminists, then I call for attending to the role of materiality in situating, directing, forming, proposing, or creating circumstances for ethical foundations. This perspective of ethics acknowledges that technologies, as well as those materials that have not been created by humans, are not so much defined in terms of borders—meaning lines separating boundaries that have been *established by humans*—as they are traceable through always-reconfiguring social and techno-material relationships. Understanding ethics as materially-situated means we must always analyze responsibility as bound up in the actions, power, and agential capabilities of the material just as much as human intention or choice.

To recap, in this chapter I build the argument that feminist approaches to ethics are a start but are not yet a complete grounding for an ethical approach to teaching in this digital time. I argue that agency has to be rethought, to be understood not as something singular that one owns but as distributed in the relations among humans and technologies.

## Agency and Materiality: Current Conversations in Composition and Rhetoric

The discussions of agency within Composition and Rhetoric studies has been a challenge and at times even a contention. One of the main tensions lies in what we now do if we agree that there is no longer a Cartesian, *I think therefore I am*, model of subject as agent, if we no longer believe ourselves to be always self-realized, self-made, and uniquely individual *in possession of* agency. Joshua Gunn and Christian Lundberg’s “Ouija Board, Are There Any Communications?”—a response to Cheryl Geisler’s report published in 2004 in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*—offers one notable example of this tension. In their article, Gunn and Lundberg accuse Geisler of believing that posthuman views of agency are inherently nihilistic. In their less than charitable critique, they accuse her, and others who share this critical view of the post-humanist subject, of *rhetorical evangelicalism*, which they describe as the approach to the study of teaching rhetoric that is ethically righteous in respect to classical norms of moral responsibility of “civic engagement” (94). In Geisler’s response published later that year, “Teaching the Post-Modern Rhetor,” she clarifies that she doesn’t say abandoning concepts of agency is an unproductive response to the critique of the self-transparent, autonomous agent, but instead that many postmodernists were struggling with the possibility that agency is illusionary (108). Importantly, Geisler connects what abandoning humanist notions of agency means for how we must move forward as we teach and engage with students:

Once the autonomous agent has been denaturalized, once we recognize the complex and fragmented forces that necessarily come into play in any rhetorical performance, we as members of the profession of rhetoric are far from in danger of losing our jobs. Indeed, tasks such as helping students first to engage with and then move to a more appropriately theorized rhetoric leave us plenty to do. And, like the Ouija Board player, we may not be



able to know how the movements of our classroom planchette will be related to our teaching intentions. But—like every other rhetor—we do know the costs of walking away from the game. (112-113)

In this passage Geisler calls for bringing complex ideas of agency into the classroom, but what I am concerned with is that the undercurrent of her words also give a warning: if into our classroom praxis we cannot bring, as Gunn and Lundberg write, the “restless and relentless thinking” required to see agency as distributed in collectives, discursive formations, and new technologies, then that thinking will remain trapped in theoretical discussions; it will have no real influence on students. Geisler calls for bringing a more appropriately theorized rhetoric—and *ethics*, I would insert as well—that encourages distributed and relational definitions of agency.

I bring up the aforementioned discussion of agency because I believe focusing on the accountability of technologies in our composing offers one answer for how we can understand agency—and thus ethical accountability—as more complex and distributed. We can move closer to a distributed model of agency in our teaching if we encourage rhetorical approaches that not only attend to what is happening between humans but what is happening as machines relate to people and other machines.

By considering distributed models of agency in relation to machines, we can move to becoming more critical of the ethical footprint of techno-material, its relationship to and with ourselves (as bodies indeed made up of matter), and how material circumstances can invite, hinder, or otherwise influence the possibility of meeting the conditions for social-relational ethics. My interest in theorizing the ethics of techno-material echoes the growing movement of scholars who have emphasized distributed models of agency that account for materiality. As

Laura Micciche asserts in “Writing Material,” rhetoricians have a responsibility to move beyond a focus on human subjective relations alone to consider how material themselves are endowed with “energy and agency, contributing to the final [writing] product in nontrivial ways” (497). Micciche calls for a focus on relational *matters*, asking “what kinds of theories and models do a better job accounting for writing’s materiality?” (497). Scholarship such as Micciche’s has encouraged an expansion of the theorization of rhetoric to account for the things, objects, matter, and tools that physically make up our text and composing processes.

Current rhetorical approaches for analyzing writing’s materiality hold opportunities for exploring the persuasiveness of the material in our day-to-day interactions. For example, in her chapter “Listening to Strange Strangers, Modifying Dreams,” Marilyn Cooper describes how we can account for the persuasion of things by listening more thoughtfully to how we *feel* connection to them (24). As Cooper writes:

Humans have for far too long assumed that nonhumans are nonconscious automatons or inert material, lacking intelligence and thus having nothing to communicate to us. Far too often we assume a similar inferiority and uncommunicativeness from other peoples and cultures. If we “listen more, allow time, and assume intelligence,” we can come to understand more of what other beings in the universe are communicating to us. Paying due attention to strangers whose opinions can infect us with new propositions—this is the new ontology of persuasion. (28)

From this perspective, *matter* is not only an object to be used by humans but is something with agential capacities beyond those of the subjective-social sphere. In other words, the material realm is recognized and respected as a one outside of complete human authority, which in turn opens up new opportunities for thinking about composing and how to do so ethically.

In the following, I continue to consider how we can best recognize and respect techno-material agencies by contrasting these views with technological determinism.

### **The Limitations of Deterministic Ethics**

Historically, deterministic perspectives have informed how we culturally make ethical judgements about technologies. Determinism, in brief, is the stance that technology has the final say over our responses: Determinism frames technology as being able to shape, on its own, social-cultural situations. As Dutch philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek describes in *Moralizing Technology*, until recently, technology itself was not typically theorized outside of deterministic perspectives that criticize the phenomenon of “technology” itself rather than addressing specific ethical problems related to technological developments (2). For example, Plato believed that the advancement of the technology of writing would lead to reduced critical participation in democratic processes and public discourse (McCormskey 192) and Friedrich Kittler’s 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* very frankly argued that media *determine* our situation (xxxix). For example, Kittler believed the invention of the Turing machine changed the nature of war from being fought for people and fatherlands to taking place between different media, information technologies, and data flow (xli). From this perspective, technological advancement always determines who wins a war.

Deterministic perspectives about techno-material also thrive through common assumptions that (for example) technology is making us good (or evil), technology is making us smarter (or dumber), or technology is making us more alike (or more different). These views are often found in trending headlines and news cycles (and often rely on a single study to claim that technology is controlling us in some way): for example, “Facebook is making us depressed, sad, and lonely” (Walker) or “Google is Making Us Stupid” (Carr).

Deterministic perspectives are problematic in a number of ways. One, they can become harmful when they are used to legitimize stereotypes about particular demographics. For example, since millennials grew up with social media technologies and this often involves selfie photography, millennials are often assumed to be self-obsessed narcissists. Mainstream media coverage often helps to circulate such beliefs, as when *Psychology Today's* September 2016 cover featured full-body photograph of a posh woman holding up pink phone to take a selfie (see figure 1) or NPR's July 2016 story "Me, Me, Me: The Rise of Narcissism in The Age of The Selfie" features a doctored image of a Greek statue holding up a phone to take a selfie (see figure 2). The popularity and frequency of these images demonstrate the cultural tendency to equate selfies, and the technologies used to produce and circulate them, to vanity or egotism as oppose to any meaningful interaction.



Figure 1: "September 2016." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/magazine/archive/2016/09](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/magazine/archive/2016/09).

## Me, Me, Me: The Rise Of Narcissism In The Age Of The Selfie

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NPR STAFF



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Figure 2: Nesterak, Max, et al. "Me, Me, Me: The Rise of Narcissism in The Age of The Selfie." NPR, 12 July 2016, [www.npr.org/2016/07/12/485087469/me-me-me-the-rise-of-narcissism-in-the-age-of-the-selfie](http://www.npr.org/2016/07/12/485087469/me-me-me-the-rise-of-narcissism-in-the-age-of-the-selfie).

Two, deterministic perspectives can also be harmful when they place ethical accountability solely on technological malfunction as opposed to seeing technological problems within a complex social-cultural context. So when technology fails, it is attributed to a bug or glitch of the technology itself. For instance, in 2009, when HP's 2009 facial identification software failed to support users with darker colored skin, Tony Welch, the lead social media strategist for HP's Personal Systems Group, described the problem in specifically technical language to avoid any discussion of race or ethnic background; as Welch stated:

The technology we use is built on standard algorithms that measure the difference in intensity of contrast between the eyes and the upper cheek and nose. We believe that the camera might have difficulty 'seeing' contrast in conditions where there is insufficient foreground lighting. (Simon)

Welch's statement ignores that cameras and film have historically been designed for those with light-colored skin or that the imagined technology user is so often the white-abled body (Caswell). Thus technology as a "bug" is one way that technology becomes severed from systematic social, political, economic, and cultural issues within which the technology is created.

Book-length arguments that tend toward determinism have become somewhat more complex arguments yet remain problematic for how they draw simple conclusions to complex issues related to identity and culture. For example, Lori Emerson's 2014 book *Reading Writing Interfaces* describes how values of user-friendliness and invisibility (versus transparency) have become an ideology of the interface, which (she argues) in turn effaces our ability to read and write, turning us into consumers rather than producers of content (xi-xvii). While I admire Emerson's work, I am concerned about the determinacy implicit in the idea that our technologies determine our identity as pure-consumers, since it doesn't allow room for ethical concerns to flourish: from a social-relational perspective, this perspective is problematic since it erases the possibility for engagement, transformation, and even resistance. If we ignore the various decisions that go into our own participation with technology and how that affects our material and ethical conditions, then we are left with the view that technology is simply a dumbing down of our own knowledge and capacities. Moreover, this view runs the risk of seeing technology as (in Emerson's words) "indistinguishable from magic" and therefore unavailable for critical engagement (3).

If we are to more fully incorporate ethical mediations of techno-material into rhetorical study then, we must be wary of deterministic perspectives since they limit our understanding of the causes and effects of technology to a one-way street that only technology has access too, in turn encouraging a certain ignorance or unthinking about the social role in the arrangement and

effects of our tools. Importantly, deterministic perspectives neglect to account for social difference through experiences of sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, class, and homophobia, etc. As Lisa Nakamura describes in *Digitizing Race*, our visual digital technology is anything but a space of utopian post-humanism where such differences are leveled out. As opposed to viewing our technology from deterministic perspectives, Nakamura suggests that we must parse the movement of power within our technologies across multiple positions that allows us to account for, for instance, the experiences of users of color and women on the internet. Rather than just blaming technology problems on a bug, it is important that these power differentials of technology are accounted for. This must be done, as Nakamura suggests, both in terms of “content” and in terms of user’s access to “forms of revision, modification, distribution, and interaction (35).

### **Seeing Beyond the Human-Technical Binary**

Another problem that interrupts our ability to move toward more ethical understanding of materiality is the tendency to see humans as ontologically divided from technologies. Media theories and feminist theories have long critiqued the trend to depend on binary distinctions to organize our lives, in part, because such distinctions always fail us in becoming critical. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Donna Haraway describes the call of feminists to recognize the false divide between the subject/object and the social/technical, particularly in light of biomedical technologies. Haraway insists that we cannot reduce social relations to natural/human objects alone, since technological tools are used to produce and maintain our social worlds (10). In other words, the relationship between *what is natural and considered human* and *what is technology and considered object* is not as clear-cut as past articulations of this binary have made them. Judy Wajcman’s *technofeminist framework* also emphasizes this technology-to-



human relationality by acknowledging that technology concentrates “upon the changing social relationship within which technologies are embedded and how technologies may facilitate or constrain those relationships” (108). And new media theorists W.J.T Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, build from McLuhan’s definition of media/mediation in order to trouble the distinction between the social and technical: Mediation is constituted “by a three-way set of exchanges among the dimensions of individual subjectivity, collective activity, and technical capability” (xi). For Mitchell and Hansen, the agency of medium as distributed among all three dimensions offers a position to understand social change, and their emphasis on technical mediation demonstrates how the human and technical are not binaries at all: instead, as Mitchell and Hansen write, “the human and the technical coevolve” (xv).

It’s important to pay attention to the ethical ramification of this coevolution. Wendy Hui Chun’s dark portrayal of modern internet technologies in *Programmed Visions* offers one demonstration. I especially appreciate her epigraph for how it alludes to the ethical distress caused by designing technology around a uniform imagining of human subjectivity. She writes:

[Y]ou tweet, you tag, you review, you buy, and you click, building global networks, building community, building databases upon databases of traces. You are the engine behind new technologies, freely producing content, freely building the future, freely exhausting yourself and others. Empowered. [...] But, who or what are you? You are you, and so is everyone else. A shifter, you both addresses you as an individual and reduces you to a you like everyone else. It is also singular and plural, thus able to call you and everyone else at the same time. Hey you. Read this. Tellingly, your homepage is no longer that hokey little thing you created after your first HTML tutorial; it’s a mass-

produced template, or even worse, someone else's home page—Google's, Facebook's, the *New York Times*... (13)

Recent marketing of technology based on values of efficiency, ease of use, and user-friendliness tends to invite and reproduce the idea that technology will improve life and make everything easier. No matter who you are or what you intend to complete, the idea is that these tools are at your fingertips and allow you to be creative and free. However, as Chun points out, a homogenizing, shadow side to our technologies distills or makes less visible particular nuances of human identity in order to make others more visible. For example, Chun describes the temporality of weblogs, describing how it's not necessarily the content that makes a particular blog uninteresting, but rather its immobility or, in other words, its failure to constantly create new content: a blog may become stale only if it fails to sustain a constant flow of new posts and information. As Chun writes, "The new is sustained by this constant demand to respond to what we do not yet know, by the goal of new media czars to continually create desire for what one has not yet experienced" (172). In this example, identities that favor responsiveness and desire are highlighted, while identities that value quality or novelty are devalued. Chun here doesn't slip into deterministic perspectives but points out that our technologies involve interconnectivity among human-technical relations. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska write in *Life After New Media*, it's not that we as autonomous humans manage, control, and use technology, but rather that "we are—physically and hence ontologically—part of that technological environment, and it makes no more sense to talk of us using it, than it does of it using us" (13).

Collectively, this scholarship suggests that, ethically, we need to understand our interactions with techno-material precisely as interaction. Just as technology does not finally determine us, we do not finally determine it. We and our technologies exist only within our

ongoing interactions—and, in fact, to emphasize this existence-only-within-interaction, one theorist (as I will soon show) asks us to think of “intra-action” rather than, simply, interaction.

For the reasons above, I now move to consider how we may more carefully attend to the *shape of techno-material* and I call for a renewed attention to spacial, environmental, ecological, and technical surroundings. If we are to move a toward a fuller conception of the ethical mediations of techno-material, I argue we must first move beyond our humanistic tendencies to see our material world as dead, inactive, or passive. In the following, I consider how feminist new materialists rethink spaces and objects in order to reorder the ethics of our lives. More specifically, I develop a view of ethics that emphasizes materiality’s role as a *mutually-affected and co-evolving arrangement of relationality with the human*.

### **Toward Material Ethics, 1**

The study of rhetoric has historically separated concerns of language (as discourse and epistemology) from the objects, tools, and materials through which language takes form (see, for example, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 CCCC chair’s address “Made Not Only in Words,” Cooper’s “Being Linked to the Matrix: Biology, Technology, and Writing,” and Haas’ “Writing Technology”). We tend to examine the writing in books while ignoring the materiality of the books themselves, or we see the visual design of a website while ignoring its supporting algorithms. Current trends in rhetorical study revise these previous limitations in what we consider worthy of attention. As Barnette and Boyle describe in *The Rhetoric of Everyday Things*,

If we continue to think of things exclusively in terms of language, appearance, or representation—as epistemological objects—we will likely go on believing that human

beings alone determine the scope and possibilities of rhetoric and that humans, as a consequence, are the only true legislators of nature. This to the peril of all things. (5)

Barnette and Boyle caution readers against social constructivist tendencies that believe people and their social and cultural circumstances are *only* what shape our reality. The authors suggest the field of rhetorical study has depended solely on social constructivist assumptions that privilege discourse for far too long. Given recent technological developments and new media, this sentiment perhaps rings even more true: focusing on discourse, after all, means being able to always locate the affordances, effects, and consequences of technology through social actions and trends. Such a perspective leaves little room to see how techno-material functions within a diffuse scope of agency. In part, our social constructivist leanings are due to how agency, and thus ethics, have been conceived from the lens of human-made action. If agency is defined in terms of a subject's moral capacity, then it becomes challenging to imagine the interconnectedness of material and technical in how we conceive of ethics.

I turn to three feminist-materialist theories to understand the ethical mediations of techno-material. I begin with Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, which draws attention to how our materials and spaces shape and are shaped by our patterns of use. I begin with Ahmed since her approach is most attached to subjective-material relations and thus more specifically relates to social-relational ethics. Jane Bennett and Karen Barad, to whom I turn next, are much more radical in their approach to material agential capacities, going as far as to decenter human-subjective experiences in their approaches. Bennett's "vibrant materiality" explores ethical accountability from the view of an "assemblage" of material elements while Barad's work extends understandings of distributed agency to prioritize material relationality (as opposed to

social relationality). Through attending to these different theoretical lenses, I establish a new set of rhetorical conditions rooted in the ethical mediations of technomaterial.

Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* examines how bodies are situated in space and time. The phrases "queer phenomenology" and "to queer phenomenology" play off the traditional, usually white, usually straight, and usually male-authored philosophical approaches of phenomenology that rely on the perspective of a universal subject pondering an object. Ahmed's argument largely centers on Edmund Husserl's description of a writing table. As Husserl writes:

For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intuitively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen and observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the veranda, into the garden, to the children in the summer-house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely 'know' that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings." (qtd. in Ahmed 28)

For Husserl, reality consist of objects that only exist in terms of how they are perceived in human consciousness.

As Ahmed points out, however, Husserl's perspective of the table assumes a traditionally performative space for men to have time and opportunity to think and compose. As Ahmed explains, there is in Husserl's writing no orientation to the table that involves the women-centered domestic chores of keeping the writing table clean or looking after children (33). In bringing attention to such other orientations, Ahmed calls for a recognition of what objects (and what labor around objects) are in the foreground of our reality compared to what is often

relegated to the background: in the case of the writing desk, the domestic upkeep required to keep the home running—and therefore allow time for men to work at the writing desk—is regulated to the background.

Ahmed contrasts Husserl's *sureness* of the writing table to her own theory of what it might mean to "queer" orientations. More specifically, to "queer," for Ahmed, means to create and form new patterns of making sense outside of conventional scripts. To *queer phenomenology* means to offer alternatives to how traditional phenomenological approaches perceive human-object relations from the stance of a universal subject (33).

Importantly, Ahmed's deconstruction of the universal subject suggests that not all bodies or identities engage with objects in the same way or even have the opportunity to engage with particular objects. Our specific orientations with material objects are impacted by identity factors including sex, gender, and race. This view of materiality suggest reality is less about the certainty a subject assumes about the existence of a material object and more a question of how the subject is orientated *in relation to an object* and *in relation to the reachability of certain objects* over others (2). As Ahmed writes:

Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and with others, with 'what' is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do. (54).

Ahmed reminds us that our repetitions and paths around particular objects are never neutral work. For Ahmed, since orientations are "both created by being followed and are followed by being created," the time men have to compose near the writing desk leads to future publication and recognition of their intellectual labor. This recognition, in turn, leads to certain norms and

conventions about *who* has the possibility to become an author (16). Ahmed describes the relationship of objects and bodies as “orientations,” referring on one hand to how bodies take up space and on the other hand to how objects enable socially-situated identity formations. From this perspective, materiality orientations are connected to ethics since they participate in how norms enable or constrain particular identities. When our orientations around material objects—just like social norms—are repeated, forgotten, and finally considered the only option available, they have a possibility to incite force and violence: that force or violence may take the form of who must take on the more trivial work of domestic care versus who is able to be publicly recognized for the work of their mind.

In the final chapter to *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that orientations also involve the racialization of space. Certain bodies are oriented in specific directions and these orientations affect how people are able to take up space. From this perspective of racialized orientations, whiteness is a bad habit, and as Ahmed describes, “a series of actions that are repeated, forgotten, and that allow some bodies to take up space by restricting the mobility of others” (129). For instance, Ahmed describes the space of an academic conference she organized, noting how odd it was for four black feminist to walk into the room with her at the same time. Academia is an institution, Ahmed notes, that uses recruitment as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness (133).

While much of Ahmed’s queer phenomenology intersects with social relational ethics, her theory offers much to consider in terms of how we repair (I would even go as far to say *heal*) our relationship with the material world that situates so much of the norms and conventions we have an ethical obligation to critique.

We see can see through Ahmed's work that we must identify spatial and material values just as much as we do the social. And if and when the paths we take around, with, or through particular material circumstance create friction to vulnerability and yielding, we must consider what new paths—in terms of both ourselves *and* the objects around which we are situated—ought to be created if we were to move toward a more responsible world.

Ahmed asks us to rethink our orientations to what we might consider commonsense material objects like desks—which, given my earlier analyses of how we overlook the materiality of technologies, means we need to be especially careful to consider them in light of Ahmed's arguments. Our orientations with/through/to techno-material objects especially must take ethical precedence in this moment. Such awareness must factor how we are always created, in part, through the "otherness of things" that offer opportunities to extend us just as they do to compress. To consider ethical engagement requires a spacial and environmental reflection just as it does a social-cultural one. This form of reflection would include questions that force us to pause and ask what material-technical circumstances are in play: What do I know of the history of this techno-material? What might be hidden or behind the scenes so that this techno-material thing exists in front of me as it does? How might this techno-material thing affect those who don't share my identities? How does this techno-material thing invite particular ways of living? How might this techno-material thing restrict the mobility of certain bodies? What opportunities does this techno-material thing allow for new forms of making—especially making that is outside of conventional scripts and norms? Such a focus would begin to move toward repairing our techno-material relations.

To continue thickening our need to question our technologies as material, I now turn to Jane Bennett and her notion of *vibrant materiality*.



Jane Bennett's vital materialist perspective, like Ahmed's work, emphasizes a feminist-centered ethics that critiques a universal understanding of subjectivity. Bennett echoes Butler's ethics by calling for critical engagement and detaching ethics from moralized politics of good versus evil that depend on individual accountability. According to Bennett, individual accounts of what it means to be ethical are problematic since they frame accountability as individual accusation or blame, which leads to a repercussion of punishment. In other words, if someone is blamed for stealing, individualistic ethics results in that person solely facing the punishment for the act. As Bennett writes, such process is "unethical since it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort" (38). For instance, rather than listening to why the stealing occurred or what circumstances led to it in the first place, the first response is to "get the thief back," whether that be through arrest or other forms of prosecution.

Additionally, a vital materialist perspective, similar to Ahmed's queer phenomenology, considers the agential role of materiality. What differs for Bennett is that she takes the emphasis on materiality a step further to more radically displace the human subject in ways that phenomenology has not (30). This displacement depends on a definition of agency that is distributed and less focused on historic perceptions that associate agency with human intentionality and moral capacity. And whereas other non-human centered theories (such as object-oriented ontologies) emphasize the distance between things and human participation, Bennett calls for recognizing how humans are a part of a shared, vital material, even if we don't see it that way. As she describes, a "vital materialist understanding of agency"

does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes. It loosens the connections between efficacy (the creativity or capacity of agency to make something new occur) and the moral subject, bringing

efficacy closer to the idea of the power to make a difference that calls for response. And this power ... is a power possessed by nonhuman bodies too. (112)

In other words, materiality is made up of charged, lively, and active energy. This wider distribution of agency means attending to who and what has the capacity to make something new appear or occur through “not mere motion, but willed or intended motion” (31).

While it may be approachable to imagine the willed and intended motions of humans, considering what materiality wills or intends can be more challenging. To address this challenge, Bennett proposes a careful anthropomorphization of materiality. For example, for Bennett, an electrical power grid is imagined as having a living heart that flutters and that is capable of dying (25). Anthropomorphization in this sense is used to expand seeing materiality beyond simply machine or tool in order to see how materiality always works as an *assemblage* or as what Bennett describes as a series of fixed parts that serve an external purpose (25). For Bennett, anthropomorphizing materiality is worth the risks it may pose (such as superstition, divinization of nature, or romanticism) since it offers opportunities for humans to reflect on that which is outside of themselves and of which they do not have knowledge:

[A] chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman “environment.” Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency. To qualify and attenuate this desire is to make it possible to discern a kind of life irreducible to the activities of humans or gods. This material vitality is me, it predates me, it exceeds me, it postdates me. (120)

Bennett here echoes Butler’s call for humility, for accepting the limits of one’s knowing. And, rather than focusing on human subjectivity, Bennett calls for a limit of knowing to be extended

to how we imagine and treat materiality and material assemblages: to become ethical is to move away from narcissistic tendencies to see humans as the only actants in the world in order to also acknowledge our own limits of knowing the material world—to understand material vitality as exceeding our own subjectivity.

Agency in light of material assemblages is imagined as “more porous, tenuous, and thus indirect” since an individual is not capable of taking on the full responsibility of any particular action (37).

According to Bennett, this does mean accountability and blame are abandoned completely or that human subjects are not responsible; instead, responsibility is understood from a broader context that requires individual humans to reflect on the material assemblages in which they find themselves participating.

Perhaps one of the most vivid passages describing agency occurs when Bennett relates the agency of human-assemblage relationships to riding a bike:

Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends? Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within the assemblage. This exertion is perhaps best understood on the model of riding a bicycle on a gravel road. One can throw one’s weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole. (38)

From a vibrant materialist perspective, ethics requires both a hesitancy toward assigning singular blame and an openness to discerning nonhuman vitality. This is one other way to interpret how *patience*—one of the eight conditions necessary for an ethics of social relationality—is required.

While Bennett's ethics brings a necessary newfound attentiveness to matter, she is clear it will not solve all matters concerning human injustice. What she hopes it might do is to "inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (14).

Finally, Karen Barad's theory of "agential realism" offers insights into how we might become more ethically and rhetorically aware of the capacities of techno-material. Agential realism builds from Butler's relational interpretation of agency and power. However, Barad's theory, in part, is also a critique of Butler: in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad proposes that Butler's theory focuses too much on subjectivity and human relations at the expense of giving matter its due. Such a strict emphasis on subjectivity, Barad argues, makes us mistakenly consider matter as always fixed and permanently bounded, mattering only for how it impacts discourse; this emphasis denies matter its own temporality (192). This critique follows in the steps of past feminist theorists who have resisted similar nature/culture dualisms by suggesting that material/discursive distinctions face the same problems: by conditioning matter within a linguistic or discursive domain, matter is cheated out of its full capacity, only viewed as a passive, immutable effect or as an end product. To correct such imbalance, Barad confronts materiality at a micro-level, grounding her theory in studies of quantum physics, attending to the nature of energy at the smallest scales of atoms and subatomic particles.

By turning to matter's subatomic level, Barad intervenes in definitions of agency to open up new opportunities for seeing change in the world. Agency, from Barad's perspective, is not an

attribute that can be held or owned; it is rather an “ongoing reconfiguration of the world” and an “interacting of the world’s becoming” (824). Importantly, for Barad, this ability to act and transform emphasizes relationality not solely between people (as with Butler) but with *matter*. To emphasize the relationality of matter, she makes a significant distinction between agency as an “interaction” versus an “intra-action.” Her choice to use the prefix “intra” is a purposeful decision to distinguish how action/transformation always emerges and occurs *within or inside a relationship*; “inter” instead suggests action between separate and autonomous agents.

From this perspective, agency emerges only through a relation or through relationships at all levels of matter: intra-actions, according to Barad, account for the “mutual constitution of entangled agencies”: matter is not just a thing that we *do to*, but is rather a doing in and of itself—or as Barad writes, matter is always a “congealing of agency” (826). All matter, even at the cellular level, is always in some form of relationships with other matter. So even if matter was stripped down to a singular atom, agency exists in that the atom is made of parts (electrons, protons, neutrons) that become recognizable from the relationship of its parts with other parts.

Since all matter is always in relationship to other matter, there needs to be some way to measure and interpret the effects of particular relations. Barad describes such a point of focus or measurement of particular actors in intra-action (or more simply, in a relationship) as the “agential cut”—reminding us that a particular *cut* reveals only a part of a larger picture. This view of agency varies from determinist perspectives and social constructionist perspectives since no priority is given to either materiality or discursivity. So our matter doesn’t do onto us and we don’t do onto it. Instead, our attention is directed to where the cut is made. Returning to Bennett’s example of a bicycle going down a gravel road is a productive way to imagine agential cuts: a cut could be made between the bike’s relationship to the gravel, or the pedals of a bike to

the human peddler's thoughts, or the actions of the human body to the pedals, or, of course, cuts could be made at an even more cellular level. "Intra" stresses that agency emerges from within relationships and so incorporates a number of different relationships into our ethical scope: human-to-human relationships, matter-to-matter relationships, human-to-matter relationships, and all articulations of relationships we can imagine or that we may fail to account for because of our historically conditioned tendency to separate mind from body, matter from human, and words from things. So it is not that we do things to things or that things do things to us; instead it is about where we choose to measure/view/realize and therefore interpret those relationships.

This perspective counters more simplistic cause and effect interpretations of agency that imagine human forces as the source of some material, social, or discursive effect. For Barad, focusing on binary distinctions between materiality and how that material is represented, counted, measured, valued in discourse is asking the wrong question since it assumes materiality is neutral and unchanging. So rather than get caught up in questions about whether priority should be given to discursivity or materiality, which places discourse as the cause of agency (we do things with our words), Barad wants a re-envisioning of agency that opens up the possibility to mutually cut—meaning to define relationships—among that which has been historically described as discourse and that which has been historically treated as passive objects.

## **Toward Material Ethics, 2**

For my purposes in this dissertation, what do Ahmed's, Bennett's, and Barad's emphases on material relationality bring to ethics as I have been considering it? First, while it is possible for our analysis of ethics to isolate, focus on, measure, or view particular various intra-actions in relation, these measures reveal only what we are making the cut (or cuts) at. This means there is always matter-in-intra-acting outside of our seeing. So when it comes to ethical blame, or to

whom or what we want to charge with doing violence, the situation is much more distributed than humans are capable of seeing, not only in social/cultural terms but also in material terms. The necessity of acknowledging one's unknowing in relation to others, as I described in Chapter 1 for social-relational ethics, must also then be extended to the material.

I see this acknowledgement of unknowing as especially productive for how we compose within digital, networked technologies. Defining agency through relationships of intra-actions means realizing our technologies are part of the changing and unfolding nature of our ethics. The more complex our technology becomes—and by *complex*, I mean how dependent on so many relationships of so many parts and systems that make up the whole—the more difficult it is to acknowledge and thus challenge the values and institutions of which technology is part. I don't believe that we are therefore always doomed to ethical failure or, on the other hand, that complete ethical accountability is possible, but rather that we have a responsibility to seek ways to see and form new relationships to techno-materiality that move us toward the conditions of social-relational ethics. In addressing technology's potential for agency, therefore, we don't disregard social-relational ethics so much as we should seek approaches that fold in the agential and ethical capacities of humans and the technologies that are a part of our world. Or as Barad writes, "these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what is excluded from mattering" (827).

To this point, I have described how feminist new materialists have developed relational and distributed theories of agency: they acknowledge that materiality—including objects, tools, environments, and natural phenomena—have a powerful and affective role in agency, and thus in how we conceive of ethics. Based on the preceding pages of analysis, I therefore propose a set of

conditions for ethical mediations of techno-material. When taken together, ethical mediations of techno-material depend on:

- (1) Revising previously assumed binaries between nature/technology, subject/object, and materiality/discursivity in order to emphasize the interconnectivity and relationality of all
- (2) Recognizing the lively, ever-evolving spacial and temporal circumstances of techno-material as is structures (and restructures) norms, patterns, and values
- (3) Identifying the relationships within which change and transformation occurs, especially those relationships outside of the human-subjective gaze
- (4) Creatively imagining the characteristics and behaviors of techno-material
- (5) Acknowledging the ways in which techno-material orients—but does not determine—the potential for human ethical choice
- (6) Developing an awareness of the complexity of techno-material assemblages—especially those relationships in an assemblage that are often forgotten or ignored
- (7) Seeking to recognize the frictions that techno-material circumstances create for self-reflexivity, vulnerability, and yielding
- (8) Defining the limitations of our own will and intended motion through recognizing that techno-material always exceeds our own experiences

Similarly to the conditions of social relationality I described at the end of Chapter 1, these conditions for techno-material describe what needs to be in place for ethics to thrive. These new conditions add to social-relational ethics in that they describe ethics from the perspective of techno-material relations as opposed to simply the social-subjective sphere.

As opposed to seeing techno-material (such as our social media) from the point of determinism, we may allow for material-ethical concerns to be acknowledged as a *mutually-*



*affected and co-evolving arrangement of relationality.* If rhetorical knowledge and technology are to co-evolve, our rhetorical knowledge must account for social-material relationality and not simply social materiality.

In the next chapter, I bring together my analyses of the social-relational and techno-material to discuss techno-social relationality and demonstrate how such an understanding can inform rhetorical approaches to social media platforms.

## Chapter Three: Toward an Approach of Techno-social Relationality

### Introduction

I begin this chapter with two stories.

The first: In 2016, Marina Lonina made headlines after live-streaming her friend's rape on the social media platform Periscope. At the time, Lonina was eighteen and her friend was seventeen; both had been lured to twenty-nine-year-old Raymond Gates's apartment, where he provided enough alcohol that both teens were severely intoxicated. As the story broke and throughout Lonina's trial, news sources often focused on the novelty of the crime itself, on Lonina's live-streaming on social media; these news sources often positioned her act of live-streaming the rape (as opposed to intervening) as more villainous than the rape itself. For instance, news sources published titles such as "Depraved Teenage Girl who Filmed and Live-streamed Her Friend Being Raped is Jailed for Just Nine Months," "Why Would Anyone Film Rape and Not Try to Stop it," and "Woman Accused of Live-streaming Teen's Rape" (Clarke-Billings; Kingkade; Kravets). In an interview for the Netflix series *Hot Girls Wanted: Turned On*, Lonina describes her experience, by further explaining the material-digital-bodily circumstances at the time of the crime. Lonina states:

I was in an excited state. I hadn't ever experienced right in front of me my friend having sex. [Her friend] was saying one thing. The guys on Periscope were saying another. Plus my mind was affect by the alcohol. Everything was a blur. I didn't know how to stop. ("Don't Stop Filming")

Here's the second story: Two years later in 2018, twenty-one-year-old Logan Paul, a popular and successful Youtube creator, vlogged his experience discovering a hanged body in Aokigahara, a forest in Japan internationally known for the prevalence of suicides that take place

here. Paul says in his vlog, after laughing and squeezing a squeaky noise maker, “Four-hundred plus vlogs, and I’ve never had a more real moment than this.” The body continued to hang behind him as he walks out of the forest. By 2 a.m. the next day, after the video had earned over twenty-four million views, Paul decided to take it down, replacing it with an apology video, which earned fifty-four million views (Ohlheiser). Before Aokigahara, Paul was already documenting much of his life on the internet, making multi-million-dollar earnings based on Youtube’s pay per view reimbursement method. At his peak, for more than 400 consecutive days, he posted a video a day, often posting more and more extreme and controversial content with each video. After Aokigahara, Paul faced consequences: his Youtube Red<sup>3</sup> project was put on hold, and he was removed from Google’s preferred partner program, which would allow him to draw the highest advertisement rates. He was able to continue earning income per video click until he posted a video of him using a taser on a dead rat ten days after the Aokigahara incident. (His Youtube ads, at this time, have been reinstated [Abramovitch].) In an October 2018 *Hollywood Reporter* interview, Paul explains his experience in Aokigahara retrospectively: “My first feeling was just dis-fucking-belief . . . I should have felt empathy. I should have been like, ‘Hey, this is wrong. Let's not do what we're doing.’” At the time of the vlog, a friend near Paul suggested that he do just that—turn off the camera—but Paul not only chose to keep the camera on but to edit the video and hit the publish button (Abramovitch).

These stories reveal a feeling of fracture between the digital and the physical: First, there is the world in which you live based on the physical environment and people around you, and you are socially and materially positioned to make certain choices within that realm; second, there is an online world that communicates through likes, comments, and follows. We exist in

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<sup>3</sup> YouTube Red is a special subscription service for Youtube that provides access to original content and other special features such as ad-free videos and offline downloads.

both at the same time: the wide-range of media and technology available means we are always also tethered to a digital realm that has its own set of patterns and orientations in addition to the IRL (“in real life”) so often referenced in online comments.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, popular opinions often echo deterministic beliefs that technologies are destroying our sense of a moral compass and thus the possibility to form ethical relationships with others. In *Reclaiming Conversation*, MIT internet researcher Sherry Turkle describes that we once were a society participating in conversation—that is, the messy and demanding communication of human relationships that attend to nuance, tone, and style—but now, because of the predetermined choices made by our technologies, we are becoming a society focused on connection over communication (Turkle 29). As Turkle describes, since most participatory media invites a habit of “grazing”—that is, the repeated habits of scrolling, “liking,” and skimming—we stunt our ability to develop sustained and critical understandings because of a constant effort to stay up to date on small and incremental pieces of information (223). There is a sense too that through this “grazing” we are desensitized and at a loss for empathy. Many fear that our participatory technologies like social media might lead to a society of impaired communicative knowledge, where our ability to engage intimately with one another is diminished under the automated, bright, and inviting light of our technologies with their “likes” and “follows.”

When the patterns and orientations of the online world butt into the decisions we make in other contexts, there is a possibility to be desensitized to the social-public world and the moral decision-making processes that are a part of it. Or perhaps it’s not that we are desensitized as much as we are over-stimulated and at times do not have the mental strategies to cope. By saying this, I do not mean to suggest Lonina and Paul are not accountable or do not deserve blame, but

that, as I've suggested throughout, we cannot simply criminalize an individual without looking at their social, material, and environmental circumstances. And we cannot simply move on, as though we do not have a responsibility to intervene.

Following from Turkle and my work in earlier chapters, I argue that, if our technological capacities encourage us to move away from thoughtful participation with one another and our technologies, then our ability to make thoughtful and ethical choices about our communication will also decline given. We need resources to sustain and exercise responsible communicative action.

In this chapter, I modestly suggest such resources through an approach I call *techno-social relationality* (TSR).

TSR is a rhetorical intervention designed to address the ethical communicative issues of social media platforms. Grounded in the ethical conditions described in Chapters 1 and 2, TSR aims to center ethics in composing by accounting for the materiality of our writing at a deep, multi-faceted level that addresses how we analyze and produce with/to/for social media platforms. A TSR approach to rhetoric helps identify the lines and boundaries connecting individual responsibility with collective responsibility and, additionally, helps us see how these responsibilities are always bound to our material relationships. TSR attends to the hazy and at times indistinguishable divide between our digital selves and our fleshy selves and helps to illuminate the black-boxed relationships of techno-materiality.

I organize this approach into three “layers.” I take this term following Joddy Murray’s article “Composing Multimodality,” in which he offers a brief list of the values we must teach students if they are to become “rhetors of multimedia.” Among these terms, he suggests analysis based on “layers,” since non-discursive texts rely on layering in their design. For example, filters

are placed on top of photos, sound on top of film, and loops and samples on top of backgrounds and scenes (338). Murray's description of layering is focused on how we help students better analyze multimodal texts since they are able to see how the different elements of a text relate to other elements. His call for attention to layering is specific to modes, to the "way of communicating" given the visual, linguistic, aural, spatial, and gestural elements of a text (Ball et. All 12-14). Or as Jennifer Roswell describes in *Working with Multimodality*, a mode is a "unit of expression" that shapes a text (2).

TSR doesn't lose sight of the significance of analysis in terms of modes, as social media platforms always require an analysis of the various design elements. But rather than center analysis on modes, TSR calls for attention to medium/mediation. Medium/mediation is often described as "the way your text reaches your audience" (Ball, Sheppard, and Arola 22): for example, is a text being shared via video, speech, physical paper, sound file, etc.? This definition, however, becomes difficult to hold on social media platforms when there are multiple mediations ongoing at the same time: a video might be shared by a user, a video with a comment from a user might be shared, an article about a video might be shared with a comment from a user. I (a bit playfully) suggest these variations to demonstrate how the relationship among elements becomes especially complex on social media platforms that have the capacity to publish new composing material, to share existing composing material that was published outside of the social media platform, and to offer commentary and response to publications within and outside of the platform.

The issues I bring up here deal with the more visible features of the technology we see in our various feeds, but there are also many less visible or invisible forms of mediation taking

place that are not obvious to an average social media user: for example, social media platforms use algorithms to curate information in our feeds.

Social media suggests in its very name a social sharing that involves collaborative and ongoing forms of mediation, and so an analysis of a singular or static form of medium/mediation falls short (if we understand “medium” simply as the means by which a text reaches an audience), since there are always different forms of mediations taking place. And some mediations are more immediate and obvious whereas others are typically outside of the conscious awareness of even the most reflective social media user who resists those tendencies to “graze” as described by Turkle.

TSR as a three-layered approach provides a form of ethical intervention by suggesting strategies for becoming critical of the various mediations in play as we read and compose on social media sites. In the following, I define each layer and offer a set of strategies and questions for identifying each. The layers are organized by first attending to those features of social media that are the most obvious based on design and then moving to what is less visible or hidden to an everyday user.

After this overview of TSR, I demonstrate this approach by first offering an analysis of a meme on Facebook; such an analysis is an example of what might be expected if this approach were brought into the first-year composition classroom. In the second analysis, of Pinterest, I demonstrate how this approach can work together with other theoretic approaches, to enable the broad contextual understandings necessary for building the ethical relations we seek.

### **Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People through a Text**

This first layer emphasizes the *social* in “techno-social relationality.” It prioritizes shared content from a human-relational perspective as opposed to looking at the larger technological

infrastructure of a social media platform. Layer 1 calls for slowing down and bringing awareness to what appears in a user's feed and what is shared within a user's feed. The mediation here is centralized between the content published or shared on a social media platform and its relationship with other human users. By saying that I call for a focus between human users, I do not mean to suggest that a post is ever unmediated; rather, questions of mediation involve analyzing the content in the feed as opposed to a more broad view of mediation that looks from the perspective of the larger and more static design features of the social media platform. The analysis in Layer 1 depends largely on multimodal rhetorical analysis, meaning that it asks for attention to be directed at a text's design through questions related to audience, context, and purpose. However, there are two distinguishing elements that are necessary for the analysis of Layer 1: (1) the question of *authorship* and (2) analysis in terms of *textual bodies*.

Layer 1 means first attending to questions of authorship and sharing on social media. Twentieth and twenty-first century technologies have opened up questions about "authorship," about who or what counts as authoring content. As Johndan Johnson-Eilola writes in his chapter in *Writing New Media* "The Database and the Essay," "For better or worse—or, in fact, for better and worse—texts no longer function as discrete objects, but as contingent, fragmented objects in circulation, as elements within constantly configured and shifting networks" (208). While Johnson-Eilola's chapter focuses on search engines as spaces of authorship in the radically post-modern sense (since each individual user rewrites the space as they enter search terms), this sense of authorship and fragmentation also occurs within our social media platforms as users copy, paste, share, and respond to content (222). On social media platforms, content is often fragmented or removed from its original source and (re)connected within different or new context—and this occurs over and over again through user participation. As Alex Reid's *The*



*Two Virtuals* suggests, the ease at which we can rip apart, remix, and reproduce texts in virtual environments challenges traditional notions of authorship (130). Reid takes this understanding of collaborative authorship even further, suggesting that it is not just text that can be remixed but that how we think always depends on a certain matter of ripping, mixing, and burning: how communication and ideas develop in a virtual world is not an anomaly—it is dependent on all human thought (130). While there is no need to analyze human cognitive thought in a TSR approach, not that this would be possible anyway, Reid's perspective on mutually-formed cognition prioritizes ways of seeing that value the social-interconnectivity and the mutual accountability important to social-relational ethics.

From a TSR perspective then, *authoring* is not simply being the original creator of a text but involves making choices to publish or otherwise interact with content in a feed, whether that content is one's own original words, a simpler sharing of another's content, or a sharing of another's content with a response. By attending to authorship through such forms of interactivity, concepts of responsibility and who is responsible for online content is not just about the individual or organization (or even bot) that created the content in the first place, and more about how that content becomes networked within the schema of the social media platform. The following questions may help to describe authorship within social media spaces: Who or what authored the content? Is the content entirely a user's own composing or a group or organization? Is the user sharing another's content (whose and where is it from)? Is the user responding or interacting with another's shared content? Is the user revising or remixing the content in some way? Is the user adding additional comments to a post? Who or what are the actors participating in the sharing and publishing of content?

The second fundamental element that is part of Layer 1 involves a careful multimodal rhetorical analysis of the *textual bodies* that are part of the content. I use the term *textual bodies* here to differentiate between a traditional rhetorical analysis of a singular body of “text” since social media analysis typically requires attending to multiple texts or a series of texts that are not always discrete. Attending to textual bodies means asking what different texts are in play given specific social media contexts. The following questions help to highlight the different textual bodies one can attend to on social media: What textual bodies appear to be the primary (as in the more immediate, visible, or dominant text)? What texts appear to be secondary or more minor? What texts are immediately connected to the text, through links, responses to the text, shared ownership, or different forms of co-authoring? What other texts is a viewer likely to encounter on the way to getting to this text?

Textual bodies might involve posts; status updates; replies; shared memes, images, and links; or reactions or likes in response to content. Textual bodies change often on social media platforms and include the continually-updating, usually synchronous, flow of composing that takes place as users create, revise, share, and respond to content. Rather than feeling compelled to analyze social media composing from the limitations of a singular post, a view of *textual bodies* offers the flexibility required to adequately analyze composing on social media platforms. The multimodal analysis required in Layer 1 may extend to examining, for example, a thread or quote tweet on Twitter<sup>4</sup>, a chronological series of Instagram stories, a meme that was shared along with a user’s own comment, or a collection of images or links a user collects on a platform. The goal in Layer 1 is to spend time analyzing mediation in terms of what content is shared, by whom, and why.

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<sup>4</sup> A “thread” is series of connected Tweets composed by one person. A “quote tweet” is allows a user to retweet the image of another’s comment along with a written comment of their own.

Keeping in mind the caveats about authorship and textual bodies just mentioned, Layer 1 pulls into analysis the elements and questions most of us know from “traditional” rhetorical analysis. In Layer 1, we analyze a text within the familiar realms of humans creating texts for each other, and so we ask, “Who created *this textual body*, for what *audience*, holding in mind what *context* and *purpose*?”

## **Layer 2: A Composer’ Relationship With the Platform Interface**

Layer 2 emphasizes the relations users have with a social media’s user interface based on its design. By user interface, I refer to how an everyday user interacts with the technology of a social media application through a screen. The emphasis on this layer is on the more static design features of a social media platform that are visible but not always what we focus our attention on as we make use of social media. As Anne Wysocki illustrates in her article “Awaywithwords,” a majority of handbooks and guides suggest that form is separate from content and serves no rhetorical function. “Awaywithwords” was published in 2005, before the ubiquity of social media platforms, but Wysocki’s suggestion to attend to what is on the screen holds just as true when considering current social media technologies. As Wysocki writes:

[W]e need to be asking, regularly, who and what are not made present at the screen, and we need to be asking what behaviors and actions are encouraged—and not—by all that is on screen and by the actions and decisions that have shaped what is on screen. (70)

In “The Design of Web 2.0,” Kristin Arola attends more specifically to how our behaviors and actions are encouraged by social media interfaces that rely on template-based interfaces that are too often “standardized and invisible” to users (5). Social media technologies, as Arola describes, give little control over a large part of our representations on the sites. For example, we don’t have the option to change fonts, colors, or the layout of our social media pages. Less design

control, she argues, may lead to less critical consciousness about the rhetorical effects of design (8-9). Arola continues, calling to bring the standardized features of interface to the discursive level, “Realistically, we are not going to change the ubiquity of template-driven design, but we can change the shape of our students’ discursive consciousness and rhetorical awareness” (12). The focus of Layer 2 is to develop further discursive and rhetorical awareness of those usually static features of the social media interface over which we as users do not have control.

Layer 2 means taking the time to acknowledge how our ability to compose ethically is always shaped by the capacities and limitations of a platform’s interface. The features of Layer 2 are visible to users, but we need to take note of what features are more visible or easier to reach than others and also what that means in terms of how the interface is directing users’ values, attitudes, actions, and emotions: in terms of social relational ethics, we may want to consider, for example, how a social media interface sets up the context for self-reflexivity, humility, and transparency within these particular contexts. Some features that would fall under Layer 2 include the sign-up interface, standardized profile design, or sounds for notifications.

Layer 2 of the analysis focuses less explicitly on analyzing the content on a platform (Layer 1) but instead attends to the material conditions of social media that so often go unnoticed. In part, Layer 2 is determined by the corporate leaders and programmers of a social media company, since they determine what colors to use, the style size of a font, and the shape of the buttons and other icons. While a TSR approach acknowledges how these decisions are made by people, the analysis focuses on creatively imagining the characteristics and behaviors of techno-material and acknowledging the ways in which techno-material orients—but does not determine—the potential for human ethical choice.

To further define this layer, I turn to a non-digital example: the relationship of a writer to a wide-ruled notebook.

We don't often think about how the material conditions of a common schoolbook notebook shape writing conventions and therefore our relationships with others. But with a closer look we can see how, for example, the shape of a lined notebook paper guides us to write from left to right and to write in a handwriting style and size determined by the placement of blue, horizontal lines; most common notebooks assume a right-handed composer, as the binding is most often located along the left side; the red vertical lines along a page let us know to when stop writing before running to the edge of a page (note that in most notebooks, the red margin line is the broadest); a notebook has certain material conditions that allow for easy mobility in a backpack or shoulder-bag; a sheet may be stamped with holes for use in a three-ring binder; pages may also be stapled together or folded to fit into a back pocket in order to be circulated among friends. No matter what purpose the lined sheet is used for, its material conditions invite a particular way of interacting and sharing.

With the rise of digital technology use, these questions about composer's relationship with technology are even more important because of the various options composers now have to write with and through their technologies. After all, we no longer have to rely so much on paper-based and alphabetic-focused composing in order to communicate and have so many more options.

Importantly, Layer 2 of TSR calls for attending to the material conditions of how technologies impact our affective reality. If we return to the notebook example, one can imagine how different it may feel writing in a fifty-nine cent notebook compared to writing with a ten dollar Moleskin: the quality of the paper, the sturdiness of the cover, and how easy it is to tear

out pages—along with the social status we feel others will attribute to these writing objects—all have the possibility to influence how we feel as we write with it and the composing we create with it. In other words, as we compose, we develop relationships to our composing material just as we use the composing to develop our relationships with ourselves and other people. We need to develop an emotional awareness of these different relationships.

Additionally, our relationships to material develop through repeated contact with them. In my own experience I know what it feels like to lose a particular notebook for writing and how that can even stall my own writing: not because I need that materials in the notebook, but instead because the notebook becomes a part of my ritual and a part of what is familiar and thus comfortable and known to me when I compose. When a notebook I have used for some time runs out of paper or all the pages are filled up or torn out, I sometimes feel a sense of completion or excitement—one that knows endings make way for new beginnings. And sometimes during my bouts of writing or during a particularly meaningful semester with a notebook, there is also a sense of loss.

I admit here to overemphasizing attachment to the composing technology of a notebook in order to draw attention to the possible relationships we form with our technologies. Following from Bennet, we may need a healthy dose of anthropomorphism to do this work or, at the very least, we must attend to the role of our own emotions as we use social media technologies.

Layer 2 can be identified through the following three-step process:

- (1) Name the static elements and features of the platform that make up its template (or in some instances, how that template interacts with the environment outside of social media, such as when a notification makes a particular noise).

- (2) Analyze these static elements in terms of values, attitudes, and emotions we believe it has as well as our own values, attitudes, and emotions toward it (in other words, what does this tell us about what the platform would like us to feel or do).
- (3) Connect (1) and (2) to consider how the elements of a site affect the context content shared on the site (Layer 1).

With these three steps, Layer 2 provides a means to consider our relationship to our tools and the different availabilities they provide for writing, reading, circulation, and response. Layer 2's process allows us to consider how a technology's design has agential, affective, and ethical impacts that we often think of as human-only traits.

Following my discussion of Layer 3, immediately below, I offer two analyses of social media—of a Facebook post and then of the Pinterest site—in which you can see how I tease out Layer 2 from specific textual bodies and then analyze it with the broader rhetorical approach I offer here.

### **Layer 3: A Platform Technology's Relationship with Other Technologies**

The third and final layer attends to the hidden and at times invisible ways our technologies interact/connect to/and compose with other technologies. I refer to Layer 3 as an understanding of online infrastructure: It focuses on the need for readers and composers to become more knowledgeable about and familiar with the invisible work that machines have been designed to do for other machines; attending to Layer 3 asks us to consider how that invisible work impacts what a user can see and interact with (and how what I see and interact with is different than what others see and interact with). I will discuss Layer 3 in more detail than the other two layers because Layer 3 is the hardest to grasp precisely because it is usually invisible.

At the present moment, our attention and relationship with social media as we teach it has been primarily focused on Layer 1 and some on Layer 2: that is, we teach the more visible features of the site, especially those that are linguistically or alphabetically present in the text. In order to define Layer 3 and highlight how its analytical features may be useful for social media composing, here I turn to the social media advocacy of the Parkland students after the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. For Layers 1 and 2, I did not feel the need to offer such an extended analysis, for those layers are, generally, more familiar to readers; with an analysis of a concrete event—and of an event that calls for very careful ethical consideration—I believe I can make visible the ethical weight of what otherwise seems invisible and technically neutral.

The Parkland students' survivors earned a lot of public recognition for how they used social media to advocate for their own ideas. Most often, they used Twitter to compose their own original posts or used the “quote tweet” feature to respond to others' posts. Their efforts centered on taking control over the gun debate narrative from conservative politicians who were trying to mute efforts for gun law reform. In the analysis of the Parkland students' Twitter use that follows, in order to do what I described in Chapter 2—that we can only truly address ethics and move toward ethical transformation if we develop strategies for recognizing how techno-material orients human ethical choice—I turn away from an exclusive ethical focus on human agency. We also need to consider how to analyze and engage with *machine agency*, especially in terms of how social media technologies relate with other technological infrastructure.

By *machine agency*, I refer to the ways that we are never fully in control of technologies since we can never in full confidence anticipate their effects. For example (and as I expand on later through the analyses), social media technology runs on algorithms that have been



programmed to run autonomously and without the intervention of a human user or programmers: machine agency recognizes the agential role of technologies since the actions and relationships they create are not always intended by the human users or programmers. Machine agency doesn't mean that agency belongs to technology so much as it recognizes the role of techno-material in a distributed model of agency.

One of the notable instances of machine agency's rhetorical moves during the Parkland shooting occurred one week after the shooting, via Youtube's trending section. At the time, a user uploaded a conspiracy video, simply titled "David Hogg the Actor," that claimed David Hogg, Parkland survivor and a vocal advocate for gun law reform, was not a real Parkland student and instead was a crisis actor. It's not unusual for conspiracy-videos to run rampant online, but what makes this particular video noteworthy was that it was featured as the number one trending video on Youtube (Maiberg). A trending video is different from other videos in that they are focused on featuring what is popular in the moment on the platform. When a video is categorized as "trending" by Youtube's algorithm, it is made more visible on the platform and thus circulates more readily among other Youtube users. Trending videos are an automated feature of Youtube that makes it easier for users to view and engage with popular videos.

Although the video was able to circulate through a more mainstream audience via Youtube, the genesis of the Hogg-actor conspiracy theory occurred in the days following the shooting, before the video was even uploaded on Youtube. Following in shoes of the more prominent radical conservative media figures such as Alex Jones, groups and organizations on Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit have a history of claiming school shooting are fake liberal propaganda whose sole purpose is to take away U.S. citizens' rights to own guns (Rojas). Hogg in particular was targeted after a video of him from a 2016 story by CBS Los Angeles began

circulating on Twitter in conservative networks. The actual footage of the video was a CBS interview with Hogg after he had filmed a confrontation between his friend and a lifeguard. During its early circulation on Twitter, users posted the original video but reframed it through their own circulation, making large leaps to compose a new reality around using their Tweets: *Hogg was in L.A. not in Florida, so that means he actually doesn't live in Florida. Hogg was in L.A. and there are lots of actors in L.A., so he is a crisis actor paid by the government. Hogg's father is a retired FBI agent so Hogg is working for the FBI.* The more connections established, the livelier the conspiracy became and the more it circulated. Smaller conservative publications also helped the conspiracy spread by writing up and publishing articles that criminalized Hogg, such as *One America News* (see figure 3).



Figure 3: One America News tweet. *www.Twitter.com*. Posted 19 Feb. 2018.

The Youtube user who posted the video extended the conspiracy narrative into a new medium, and through that new medium the video was able to quickly gain a broader audience than what was possible on Twitter. In other words, because a YouTube algorithm categorized the video as

*trending*, it opened the potential for more extreme political views to be introduced to YouTube's more mainstream users.

Conspiracy theories have always been a part of culture, and online culture especially so because of how easy it is to write and publish content in a new context and for different audiences, but such theories are often kept in the less visible corners of the web or within specific communities (Prooijen and Douglas; Prooijen and Van Vugt). The video "David Hogg is an Actor" was an oddity given how quickly it circulated, earning over 200,000 views within less than twenty-four-hours (Herrman).

After Motherboard reported that the video was trending, it was taken down from Youtube. Soon after, Youtube released a statement to media sources stating that the reason the video spread so quickly and earned so many viewers was because the algorithm used to determine trending content recognized that the video came from an authoritative news source: this was because the user who uploaded the video, a fifty-one year old man from Idaho whose user name is "mike m," cut up an already existing textual body and retitled it (Herrman); more specifically, "mike m" took a story from CBS Los Angeles, trimmed the video, and republished it with a new caption: "David Hogg the Actor" (Maiberg). According to Youtube's response to Motherboard, since the word "actor" doesn't always carry negative connotations, there was no way for the algorithm—and how it has been programmed to run outside of human intervention—to determine that it was a conspiracy video (Maiberg). In other words, the video, after being read by the machine, was classified as relevant and approved for further circulation—with no human decision involved.

Although this particular video was taken down, there are several other textual bodies that continued to suggest Hogg and others involved in the Parkland shooting were crisis actors. This

conspiracy continued to spread, especially on Twitter, where much of the circulation of the video took place. Twitter itself has yet to intervene in the circulation of the video by their users (Herrman).

“Hogg as crisis actor” wasn’t the only conspiracy theory to surface after the Parkland shooting, nor could it even be labeled as the most widely shared, but what its circulation does help to illustrate is that—even though content may be written by human creators—machines and the algorithms that run them have a significant role in why and how much these stories are able to circulate among human users and, of course, influence their political values. And we must be attuned to how much this influences students’ current composing worlds: platforms have created algorithms that decide what videos matter or should be viewed compared to others, and it’s important to consider how these platforms are capable of reading our compositions and making decisions about how they circulate autonomously and outside of the direct influence of human creators or human readers. As such, the platform itself has a role in constructing our political narratives and therefore our ideologies as citizens. The frequency and speed at which social media platforms have the capacity to publish and circulate information poses new challenges for democracy—challenges that demand new technological knowledges. This is especially true given that conspiracy theories are circulated and invented by radicalized conspiracy groups who have the ability to network, meet, and share ideas through standardized platform interface despite geographical distance.

When the Parkland teens were confronted with the effects of machine agency to circulate conspiracy theories, they centered their critique on those people spreading or believing the conspiracies, and often they did so through quick-witted and humorous tweets. Sarah

Chadwick's response to the Hogg conspiracy theory, for instance, playfully mock's David Hogg's acting skills in a gentle jab to the conspiracy believers (see figure 4).

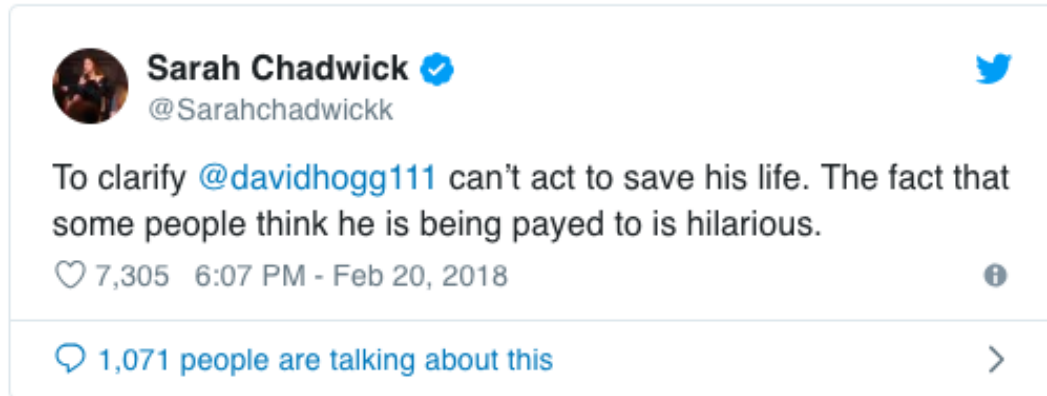


Figure 4: Sarah Chadwick's response to the Hogg conspiracy theories

Such instances of direct engagement with human actors is of course necessary and important. But I wonder what might be possible if we could change, or at least challenge, how we think about blame and accountability in terms of how information is shared in order to consider machine relations. What would it be like to move the conversation away from blame being solely framed through human ethical failure? What if we were to move toward further acknowledging the role of our technologies in how we create our narratives and histories?

What I'm interested in is what would happen if we, collectively, were to acknowledge the ways that machine agency influences rhetorical agency, and, moreover, used such acknowledgements to inform rhetorical advocacy. How could the current gun control debate shift if Parkland students held not only politicians and citizens accountable but also the social media technologies that shared and continue to share false information about guns, gun violence, and school shootings? What if they challenged how social media spaces allow for radical pro-gun groups to organize and communicate? What if they called for more responsible algorithms and

other forms of machine automation? What would be possible if it wasn't just a gun and human issue but an ecology of blame involving humans, machines, tools, networks, cultures, policy and information? What, too, if Parkland students accounted for the many ways that social media works against their aims by functioning as a tool to spread misinformation, not only about their identities but also about gun law more generally?

And finally, what might be possible if such concerns were not an afterthought to a specific severe platform error, but rather were formally folded into how we consider the composing process?

*And what are the first steps towards this work?*

I believe innovative learning opportunities abound if we bring more critical attention to machine agency, especially in the context of social media communication. This is where the work of Layer 3 centers.

Since Layer 3 is often not immediately visible to the average user (just as it was not known how or why the Hogg conspiracy video was a number one trending video until Youtube released a statement), one must use certain strategies of reading and research in order to make efforts at seeing Layer 3. Layer 3 means becoming familiar with existing systems of naming that help us describe what we cannot see on our platforms as technology nonprofessionals. Analyzing this layer also requires a familiarity with alternative technologies that help one see and subvert existing technological structures.

Some examples of what Layer 3 attends to are how a platform communicates with and across other platforms, online networks, or even phone technologies; how search results are automated into the order we see them; and how corporate surveillance influences the advertisements that show up in our feeds. To get at these features that are so often not visible, I

describe the machine-driven work of Layer 3 in terms of *circulation*, *automation*, and *surveillance*. Similar to Layer 2, Layer 3 also acknowledges how emotions, ideologies, technologies, and other materiality *all* have a role in shaping what is considered to be worthy or acceptable (or not).

Since Layer 3 has unique challenges to address in rhetorical terms, I spend time with each of its technological capacities (circulation, automation, and surveillance) to describe questions and concerns for how they may be used in our analysis and production of social media texts.

### Circulation

Circulation of a composer's content can happen within the social media platform itself, between different social media platforms, between social media and databases, and between social media and other websites or technological tools. We don't always see the patterns of circulation that a particular post makes, although this is a part of the history of the social media platform. The following strategies may be used to trace social media-related circulation patterns, for analysis:

- (1) *Backtrack content on a platform*: Posts, memes, images, and stories are often shared and then re-shared by various groups and organizations. Backtracking content means going outside of the original post (as it came into one's social media feed) in order to discover its sharing history within and outside of the platform. Importantly, backtracking means bringing critical awareness to the motivations, values, and ideologies that are embedded in content based on the groups, individuals, and organizations who have circulated it. In short, backtracking brings awareness to how content on social media is often tied to the values and organizations that are not immediately visible based on a single post alone (based on a platform's design). Backtracking outside of a platform requires some knowledge of how texts circulate online across different contexts and for different

purposes. One technique for accomplishing this is to “read laterally”—a term I take from Sam Wineburg and Sara McGrew to refer to reading across various pages and sources to gather necessary context (“Lateral Reading”). Reading laterally differs from the ways we are typically taught to read, as vertically from left to right on a single page. Instead one is required to use alternative search methods (such as Google Image search), to examine “about” pages or descriptions of authors, and more generally complete the necessary background work to understand context about a particular online text.

(2) *Consider content in relation to social media currencies:* Every social media platform has its own method for determining the “value” of a particular post, profile, group, image, etc. Considering social media currencies means asking and reflecting on how content is viewed as valuable and thus available for circulation on the platform. Social media currency may involve how “likes” or “follows” determine visibility and thus the likelihood of circulation over others (e.g.: promoted content on Twitter or Facebook). One may ask questions such as: What likes, shares, or other interactions does particular content have? How does that impact how it is made visible (or not) to others? Considering circulation in relation to social media currency means developing an awareness of the platform’s values and ideologies and how they intersect with the values of particular content.

(3) *Examine content’s curation in relation to current trending or popular content on the platform:* It is important, as one walks through the various steps to trace the circulation of a post, to consider how the values, attitudes, and emotions of a platform intersect or diverge from the human values, attitudes, and emotions associated with a post.

Everything online is determined by algorithms and written by code to which everyday



users usually do not have access. Attending to content's curation means to try to make more visible the work that code and algorithms do that allow certain content (and thus certain values) to be circulated over others. For example, how do issues related to a particular post come up in Google searches? How do particular phrases in a meme resonate with popular searches or trending news stories? How does online curation influence or fuel the circulation of particular content?

### Automation

*Automation* refers to how technologies automate content for users and make choices for users outside of their control. Often, updates to social media software are not made transparent to users and may even go unnoticed. Automation calls for users to consider what content has been automated for them given machine intelligences—especially those automations that are personalized (e.g., when Spotify recommends music based on past listening preferences or when Twitter recommends profiles for users to follow or when Snapchat organizes content). It also calls for attending to the ways in which other users may have different automation experiences (based on the different ways others participate on a platform). Since automations are done for users and don't require thinking or decision-making, their rhetorical effects might go undetected. The below questions encourage discovering the rhetorical effects of automation both within and outside of a platform:

- (1) *Name all automations:* Name those choices that are determined for a user, outside of direct user oversight.
- (2) *Speculate how others' automations might be different than one's own.* For example: what choices did you make on a platform that bring about such automations? What choices that

others may make their automations different? Figuring this out is most helped by sitting with others to compare what happens differently as we use social media.

(3) *Seek out outside applications and other resources that help one develop knowledge about how a platform's automations work.* For example, read through a platform's policies, social media updates, and websites; seek out resources that describe what content is automated and how; compare one's content with other user's; experiment by interacting with material that you wouldn't normally interact with a note what changes.

## Surveillance

Of the different components that make up Layer 3, surveillance—that is, user data collection by the social media application itself or by other corporate, technical, and governmental entities—is often the most difficult to identify and trace.

Often surveillance on a platform meshes with features that are automated on a particular site. For example, Facebook uses image processing technologies to help users more easily tag photos of themselves and others without needing to type in a name. Surveillance is also used on Spotify to provide users with “Discover Weekly” playlists based on previous listening history. In instances such as these, and many others, such data collection is positioned as gift to users since it allows platform technologies to be more efficient and resourceful. Of course, these features can be just as intrusive as they are helpful, especially when platforms allow data surveillance by third parties that later can be weaponized, as was the case when Cambridge Analytica secretly used the data of over fifty millions users without their permission for Trump's 2016 presidential campaign (“The Cambridge Analytica Story, Explained”).

There is no easy single method for tracking down information related to surveillance or its rhetorical effects: These are very challenging to trace, and social media companies are often

not transparent about surveillance. But attending to surveillance does mean slowing down and seeking out opportunities for better understanding where data goes. It requires a reflective and knowledge-seeking alertness and an underlying awareness that this tracking is ongoing in the background of all social media accounts.

It's not often that we, as rhetoricians, consider how the composing choices we make on Facebook and other social media platforms are not just for ourselves or the people we interact with but also for our machines and the other technologies with which they in turn communicate—and it's therefore not often that we consider how our choices are used to shape our experiences through how the software is “personalized” for us. Activist and author Eli Pariser described this form of nonconsensual web personalization as a “filter bubble.” The more composing choices we make on Facebook (including posting and responding to content), the more information algorithms can personalize our online content and create these “filter bubbles.” All online content is in some way personalized, and the cost we pay as users is a limited view of other perspectives outside of our own. We don't know how it is decided for us to see certain content over others. We don't have any control over how this works. And we don't know how else our data is being used.

We can become more knowledgeable about surveillance through making use of technologies and resources that have been designed to subvert social media surveillance. We can, for example, download browser extensions or applications that block particular content from being surveilled from the platform (I expand more on this in Chapter 4). We can also complete research in order to discover the changes made to a platform. The following strategies offer a starting point for such research:

- (1) *Search the platform on Wikipedia*: While not all the updates to a platform are listed on Wikipedia, this resource offers a look at what updates to a platform were most disruptive or newsworthy and the types of privacy concerns that arose in the process. Wikipedia also links to the media publications that reported on a platform as it was updating.
- (2) *Follow the media feeds a platform (as a company) controls*: Platforms often have their own blogs, websites, and social media accounts that detail the changes that are being made on a platform. For example, Pinterest has a Twitter feed and has a (now defunct) blog that detailed the changes to their website. Although when reading the announcements a platform writes for themselves, it's important to be aware the platform isn't going to reveal all the changes they made (and why) and that usually the updates are written in a positive light (like the update will allow people better connection to people or products). Usually only the visible updates are announced on platform's media feed, but in these instances, it's important to question what type of algorithmic surveillance is required in order for these features to function for users.
- (3) *Read from technology forums and nonprofits focused on privacy concerns*: If there is a change that seems or looks new on a platform but is not being openly discussed, many users and technology writers use sites such as Reddit to describe the changes and how they affect them as individual users. In addition, non-profit organizations such as Privacy International have free and online several resources that explain the different forms of surveillance on a number of social media platforms.

### **A note about how the layers intersect**

I want to take a moment to emphasize that, rather than being separate or distinct, the three layers all intersect and, through those intersections, create new dynamics for agency. Just as TSR

prioritizes relationships as the starting point for agency, subjectivity, and composing, these layers are designed to help users become more aware of the techno-material relationships as social media readers and composers by offering different points to create, in Barad's words, an *agential cut*. Thus, this approach is best put to practice when one sees how one layer offers a way of filtering another layer. For example, we often think of posting content and authoring on a social media account as something a human user does. However, in the case of Twitter bots, which is software that has been created to automate authorship on a social media account, the authoring is actually done through the invisible technology of Layer 3. In other words, the capacities of the more invisible online infrastructure must be discovered through research (e.g. learning the language features common for Twitter bots or using bot detecting websites such as Botometer) if one is to be able to best analyze the content posted. The primary emphasis of this approach is to acknowledge that technology and humans both have agential roles in the composing process and that our technology influences, but does not determine, our ethical capacities—and that such distributed notions of agency mean distributed notions of ethics.

In the following, I demonstrate a TSR approach by offering two examples of application: the first focuses on a meme on Facebook and the second looks at the trends of content on Pinterest and its relationship to economic conditions. In each analysis, I go through each layer individually from Layer 1 to Layer 3, in order to demonstrate the distinctions between them and what they offer for rhetorical analysis.

### **Expanding Our Rhetorical Seeing Through a TSR Approach: Facebook Meme Sharing and Political Consequence**

The unfriending and unfollowing options on Facebook are often presented as solutions to the problem of repeatedly viewing social and political posts from those with whom we disagree. To

unfollow or unfriend, at least on Facebook, provides a metaphorical bandaid for the social wounds of anger, resentment, and offence we can experience. I'll apply TSR so we may better understand the rhetorical and ethical effects underlying the choice to unfriend or unfollow and the complications to ethical responsibility this poses.

I've chosen to focus on a meme shared by one of my Facebook friends with whom I have a longstanding relationship. This meme resonated emotionally for me in the moment I read it, which leads me to exploring why, as a way to test using TSR for analysis (see figure 5).



Figure 5: Twilight Zone meme within Facebook newsfeed. www.Facebook.com. Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017. Selections of this screenshot have been redacted.

This meme appeared on my Facebook feed just over two weeks after Donald Trump took his presidential oath and a week after he signed an executive order banning people from seven Muslim-majority countries. Facebook was abuzz with news about protests at airports and lawyers volunteering to help those who were stuck in the midst of the chaos. The meme—a political commentary on the airport protests—was shared by my Facebook friend “Lydia.”

#### Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People

The first layer of TSR begins by looking at authorship and textual bodies. This first layer is perhaps the most traditional, since it emphasizes multimodal rhetorical analysis, most often understood as human relationships in terms of audience, context, and purpose.

The primary textual body in the post is a meme, or a short text that pairs an image with words and often spread virally. The image that makes up the background of the meme is a black and white picture of Rod Serling, narrator of the television series *The Twilight Zone*. Lydia participated as an author of the post by sharing the meme, but she chose not to add her own content to the meme by revising it, remixing it, or adding any additional textual bodies to it. The group that originally published the image on Facebook (at least from what is available in this post), Uncle Same’s Misguided Children, did include some writing in addition to the meme. This came in the form of several hashtags related to veterans, a link to what appears to be an online shop, a discount code, and a link to what appears to be a related Facebook group. Since the primary textual body is the meme itself as opposed to how others added to the meme, I focus on this image for the first layer analysis.

The top section of the meme includes the show’s popular opening phrase, “Imagine if you will:” in a bolded and capitalized green font. These two choices—the image of Rod Serling and the introductory phrasing—are the general structure of a common meme that has been

revised and remixed through many iterations on the internet. Generally when memes invoke the *Twilight Zone*'s opening, it is to draw attention to a real-world situation or event that feels unreasonable, strange, or alien. The bright green color of the opening phrasing further emphasizes this point since this shade of green is often used in cultural associations with the “weird.” (For example, Halloween-theme decor, the covers of young adult sci-fi novels, and even Nickelodeon slime all bear a similar tone of green).

In each reconfiguration of a *Twilight Zone* meme, the punchline rests on bringing attention to what a particular ideology considers absurd, given the politics of real-world events. The main image and phrasing “imagine if you will” are likely to be recognizable to the general American Facebook user, especially to those baby boomers who watched the *Twilight Zone* when it originally aired. Given that the *Twilight Zone* has become such a popular trope within American media, however, even those who have not viewed an episode of the show are likely to find the phrasing recognizable.

The original writing of the meme (that which follows the “imagine if you will” phrasing) is made up of two colors of bolded font: White letters are used as the primary font color and neon yellow letters are used to emphasize certain phrases in the meme:

Living in a country where *more people show up at the airport to protest* scrutinizing the backgrounds of people from nations full of our enemies, *than ever showed up to welcome back our soldiers* from fighting those enemies ...

The decision to use yellow here emphasizes the contrast between the action of showing up to protest (assumed to be bad behavior in the meme) with the patriotic action of welcoming soldiers back from war (assumed to be good behavior). Such sharp contrast between protest and patriotism is often made by conservative pundits such as Alex Jones, Tomi Lahren, or Bill



O'Reilly whose ideologies often include (1) the villainization of civil rights-related protest as a waste of time, irresponsible, whiney, and unthankful and (2) the framing of enthusiastic support of armed defenses as an always-positive responsibility of a U.S. citizen. A conservative may find their perspective aligns with the meme's, since the perspective is in line with these popular conservative ideologies that value the patriotic and unquestioning support for armed defenses and their sacrifices.

It is also important to consider what is *not* emphasized by the choice of font within this meme, in particular the references to “enemies.” In drawing attention to the familiar discourse of patriotism versus protest, the meme camouflages, to some degree, its implicitly racist and Islamophobic views, the belief that all countries with high Muslim populations are U.S. enemies.

The meme also depends on the verb “scrutinize” to describe the treatment the implied enemies receive at the airport during the ban. This particular word choice suggests that the ban was created—as the dictionary definition of “scrutinize” states— “to examine closely and minutely” (Merriam-Webster). The verb “scrutinize” is strategically used to draw attention to the implied absurdity of the protest since “scrutiny” on its own does not imply violent or unjust action.

A closer look at the actions resulting from Executive Order 13769, however, contradict such conclusions. Sixty thousand visas were “provisionally revoked” with little to no warning, which led to 700 detained travelers (Jarret). Thus Executive Order 122769 was not simply the case of a “close examination” or even slowing down of entry but a blanket ban from entry. The inconsistency in verb choice between the action of the ban and the description of the meme may not bother a conservative-leaning audience—especially those who more radically align themselves with the alt-right— since the white supremacy views Muslim populations as enemies

to the United States. Considering how much these ideologies have filtered into mainstream discussions, it is not just a matter of vetting people more carefully, but—because they are “our” enemies—it is believed that Muslims have no right to enter or live on US territory (NAACP). Using “scrutinize” and emphasizing respect for soldiers are strategic choices that create a “just racist enough” but “not too racist to offend” balance to the meme that allow it to be accepted by a broader audience: Those who might be already dispositioned to have negative opinions about Muslims will agree or identify with the post without feeling any moral qualms about the Islamophobic assumptions the meme brings with it.

In addition to the overarching image from the *Twilight Zone*, the meme also features a small clipart-like image of a crying baby in the upper-right hand corner (presumably in order to identify the meme maker). There used to be a Facebook page titled “trumpwaahh,” but it has now been shut down (Facebook has not revealed information about how or why). Given that conservative political pundits often favor a representation of liberals as “bleeding hearts,” “snowflakes,” or “whiney,” the baby image fits in with familiar discourse binaries that classify conservatives in contrast as strong, independent, and not emotional (see figure 6).

The image is of a *crying* baby, which echoes popular classifications as *crybabies* those who oppose Trump’s executive order or more generally his presidency.

So far, I have covered the conservative perspective of this meme, but it’s important to also acknowledge that this meme, like most memes, has more than one audience: those that agree with it *and* those who disagree. Just as the meme supports conservative views, it is also designed to aggressively confront those who support the protests and have unfavorable views of Trump.

Those who agree with the meme see it as affirming a commitment to U. S. veterans and to Trump while criminalizing Muslims and those who oppose Trump’s policies. For those who

disagree and view the travel ban as unjust, hasty, and Islamophobic, the meme is designed for the purpose of mocking and offending. Rather than a shared communication of good faith, the meme (and many memes like it) recreates and furthers political division centered on normative views of Democrat and Republican ideologies.

In this particular instance, the meme was shared on Facebook as a “photo” and contained no commentary or original writing by Lydia. Had she stated any form of response along with the post, it too would be included in this first layer of analysis as well.

Through attention to Layer 1, the textual bodies and the ways in which they have been authored come to the forefront. Thus social media is understood through interpretations of multimodal rhetorical analysis that emphasis composer and audience relations (with an emphasis on modes, such as—in this case—uses of color, typography, photographs, and arrangement).

#### Layer 2: A Composer’s Relationships With Platform Technology

While Layer 1 attends to more traditional interpretations of rhetorical analysis that focus on a static text that has been isolated and, to some degree, frozen in time, Layer 2 draws rhetorical attention to the medium or platform template within which the text circulates—or more specifically, as the notebook example above demonstrates, draws rhetorical attention to how people imagine and take up relationships with their social media technologies.

I address Layer 2 by analyzing some of the key features of the particular platform on which this meme was published—Facebook—and then I move through others’ posts in response to the meme, chronologically, beginning with Lydia’s interaction with the meme and her decision to post it to later on that day when I read and thought through a choice to respond.



Figure 6: Personal Facebook homepage. [www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com). Retrieved 14 June 2018. Selections of this screenshot have been redacted.

Facebook’s home interface (see figure 7) is fairly busy and provides access to the site’s features, including Stories, the Trending page, the News Feed, the Marketplace, and a personalized listing of the different groups a user has joined. All of these features are fairly popular on Facebook, but the most popular feature based on placement and on frequency of use is the “News Feed” (previously known as the Facebook wall). The “News Feed” is where users can post or scroll through the posts of the various users, groups, and organizations they follow. The News Feed also automatically suggests personalized sponsored content, which appears visually similar to non-sponsored posts.

One of the key aspects of Facebook’s wall is that it constantly changes, shifts, and refreshes as users scroll down the page. Given this design, users may find it challenging to return to or find a post after initially scrolling past it. The time between seeing and reading a post and its sharing must be fairly immediate, or, at the very least, one must take a pause from doing

anything else on Facebook in order to read a post or link and share it. Facebook does allow a user to “save” or “bookmark” a post, but this option is hidden rather than being one of the more visually available options such as “react,” “comment,” or “share.” (It is interesting to consider what a Facebook interface would look like if one were allowed to “save” just as readily as “react,” “comment,” or “share.”) The lack of easy and visible Save options creates a composing environment where users are continuously presented with new information to interact with but are provided no time for consideration, research, or personal reflection.

By looking carefully at Facebook’s interface design, I can infer much about Lydia’s initial interaction with the meme and her decision to share. For one, Lydia most likely ran into the meme on her personalized News Feed and shared it soon afterward. (Facebook timestamps her share at 8:53am on Tuesday morning.) Once posted, Lydia’s friends were able to interact with the meme, and Lydia functioned as a mediator who linked the content to a broader audience. By the time I read the meme, six of her friends had selected the “like” reaction (and 10 more people chose to “like” it as of my writing about Lydia’s post). None of those who interacted with the meme made a decision to share or comment on it, which meant no other textual bodies were created through sharing the meme.

Here it is important to note that these quick instances of ideological circulation are important to attend to since they show how memes, or other image-based political content shared online, are less about questioning or thinking and more about continuing and confirming an existing worldview (a worldview explored in Layer 1). By focusing on user-technology relationships as opposed to audience-composer relationships, it becomes clearer that the choice to circulate a meme is a form of composing that—instead of asking one to develop personal ideas—allows one more simply to communicate and affirm one’s views and identities with

others. Understanding such acts of circulation as a form of composing—a composing that is distinctly different from the rhetoric of good faith we often aim to teaching our writing classes—opens up the opportunity to investigate shortcomings that come with traditional views of ethics and authorship where accountability (as ethos) is limited to the author of a text. Of course this has always been the case, but the public visibility and ease at which text can be circulated and shared with others has created a greater emphasis on the responsibility of sharing. Within most social media environments one becomes accountable as soon as they make a decision to share and interact with particular content.

Yet, there is another side here too. Just as I discussed with Layer 1, the meme itself has been designed to affirm the opinions of those who disagree with it just as much as it was designed to offend those who disagree. To show this side, I get personal and share my own experience.

On the evening I read this meme, about twelve hours after Lydia had shared it, I was not prepared to enter a serious political conversation. I had finished work in the evening and was only checking in after being reminded by my phone that I had a Facebook notification from another friend on the platform (on my phone, the Facebook logo marks notifications with a red number counter). When I say I wasn't prepared for a serious political conversation, I don't mean to say I was naive enough to believe political updates or posts would not be in my news feed, as I knew this happened frequently, although I had not expected a single post to strike such an angry and frustrated chord in me at that time. In part, these emotions were unexpected because Facebook as a social media application is often framed as a leisurely activity: Facebook presents itself as a pleasant space by using a friendly, blue and white layout; by emphasizing “connections”; and by using affirmative language (including “likes,” “friends,” etc.). The non-

threatening design of the site clashed with the very emotional and bodily experience that came with reading this particular meme: It caused my heart to race and my throat and stomach to tighten. Through reading I was pushed into a fight-or-flight mentality, which would have been visible to anyone who had witnessed my body language. Given the online medium, my posture, my gesture, and my facial features were all invisible to Lydia, who by that time had posted the meme nearly twelve hours before and was physically located several hundreds of miles away.

Though my relationship with the meme and reaction to it were very different (I can only assume) than Lydia's, the medium provided us both with the same immediate options to respond: "comment," "react," or "share." While Lydia's circulation of the meme involved a (perhaps unreflective) affirmation of her political ideologies, my experience was an impulse to seek immediate retaliation—to attack in some form. The meme's communication with me was not one that tended toward rational or cordial forms of engagement, and the medium itself offered no time for reflection or space for managing these emotions. As a result, I was more interested in obtaining revenge through impulsive argument or through other ways to convey my negative reaction to the meme.

While Lydia didn't tag me in the meme or provide any written commentary to suggest she was targeting me or my views, the meme felt as though it was attacking me personally. The only connection to that was that it ended up in my personalized feed (which I will describe in more detail when I apply Layer 3 to the meme). The reasons this meme, of all the memes on Facebook, had such an intense effect was due to context outside of the Facebook medium that was part of the struggles of my day-to-day work week—struggles of course that Lydia had no way of seeing or hearing, given that we had not caught up one-on-one in some time. Just three weeks beforehand, one of the top students in my class—an immigrant from Iraq—met with me

during office hours and shared the challenges he faced in the process of obtaining his Green Card. His circumstances, all of which were outside of his control, had already made the process difficult and he feared that Trump's presidency would make the process impossible. The student also had a sick mother, in Iraq, whose condition seemed to be worsening: What were the chances that he would be able to see his mother if he needed to and still be able to get back into the U.S. to continue his education?

In addition to these personal circumstances, my reaction to the meme—probably like the reactions of others who disagree with it—is bound to cultural knowledges about the history of white privilege, the desire for immigration reform, and fears surrounding Islamophobia and the trend of mainstreaming white supremacist beliefs. Such cultural knowledges have also supported an ideology that views passive response or ignoring this post as form of violence (“silence is violence” as the popular activist slogan states). So if the post, according to my progressive-learning ideologies, was problematic and could not be ignored, the next step was to move toward an option for response. The “comment,” “react,” and “share” options were all available, but given my anger in that moment, I was more interested in making a more abrupt severing: In particular, I focused in on the “unfollow” options Facebook allows for. Facebook's platform allows for three different forms of unfollowing:

- (1) Facebook users may “snooze” a user. If you choose this option, someone will not appear on your Facebook wall for 30 days.
- (2) Users can also choose a more traditional “unfollow,” which allows a user to remain friends with someone but not see anything they write (at least until the unfollow option is deselected).



(3) The most dramatic measure is to “unfriend,” which will remove a selected user from one’s friend list and, if one’s profile is set to private, block them from viewing your content.

Given the options I had available to me at the time, I could make the decision to “unfriend” Lydia, an option that seemed particularly appealing given that it was likely to emotionally hurt or offend Lydia once she found out and would allow me an easy-out in terms of addressing what I believed to be the problematic nature of her post. If I were to make the choice to unfriend, I would also limit one of the primary forms of communication Lydia and I have with one another. And a sudden “unfriending” on Facebook does not go unnoticed: It also affects life outside of the platform and could have the possibility of making future face-to-face meetings between Lydia and me uncomfortable or unsettling. Selecting the permanent “unfriend” option would allow me an out from the burden of the rhetorical and emotional labor required to have a conversation about the post, but at the same time it would make it challenging to engage with Lydia again afterward.

Before ending the analysis of Layer 2, I want to return one more time to the news feed feature, which is where I ran into the meme in the first place. Reading the meme on the newsfeed rather than on a particular profile page means that Lydia was only known to me in that moment through the meme she posted. Absent were other aspects of her identity that might have also helped me to develop a more complete understanding of her and her thinking processes that might have enabled me to have more empathy and patience for her political views. If I were to explore Lydia’s Facebook communication beyond the single post and if I were to look at her profile, I would have perhaps been able to have a more multi-dimensional sense of her personality and could perhaps even have found some common ground. For example, if I had

stopped to look at her profile view, I would have been able to see a broader section of the textual bodies she has authored, which include more light-hearted posts about living in rural America or joking memes about growing up without a lot of wealth. I would also have seen the number of photos she posted of her mother and father, both of whom have passed away. By looking at the photos in her profile albums, I would also have seen several pictures of her father in his uniform. I would be reminded that he was a veteran and that his passing had not been easy for her.

So while a profile view may allow us to understand another's life and identities in more nuanced ways than possible with a single post, it is not always easy to see this nuance based on the always-updating wall feature that isolates individual posts from the human behind the posting. And as a medium without the gestural and tonal clues that a face-to-face presence provides, users turn to the wall as they are invited to, without much thought, to scroll through a line of brief posts, one after the other. And of course it is not easy to distance oneself from the urge for instant retaliation that Facebook allows for and even encourages.

For now, though, I want to go even deeper. I'm going to move from the visible aspects of the platform that make up Layer 2 in order to consider how the less obvious and visible technological features have rhetorical consequences—consequences that go beyond simple meme exchange between Lydia and me.

### Layer 3: Platform Technology's Relationships with Other Technologies

Layer 3 focuses on tracing and making more visible the effects of three technological capacities: *circulation*, *automation*, and *surveillance*.

I'll focus here on how Facebook curates and arranges content for me on *my* page as opposed to on Lydia's page and the pages of others who are part of the network. It's also important to note that Layer 3 requires some general knowledge about how social media

networks cater content to viewers based on factors such as their likes, follows, group associations, location, and friends.

Examining the meme in context of my social media curation, I note that Lydia has several of the same family friends as me on Facebook. It is possible that Lydia and my number of shared friends (and the activity between them) raised the chance of me seeing her post on my wall (since Facebook does not show us everything every single one of our Friends posts).

I also know that if I were to choose the “unfriend” or “unfollow” option (described in the Layer 2 analysis), I would not only be communicating with Lydia but also with the technology of Facebook, telling the platform to curate material for me around my worldview and preventing engagement with other perspectives. The more authoring choices we make on Facebook (including posting, reacting, and responding to content), the more information algorithms have to personalize our online content and create filter bubbles. This, however, creates a problem since we don’t know how it is decided for us to see certain content: I don’t have any direct control over what Facebook selects for me to view.

Looking outside of the platform—reading laterally—tells us even more about how this meme and my communication with Lydia are impacted by the larger relationship of texts, users, and computers within a network. Reading Lydia’s post laterally means not only focusing on the meme, my communication, or the Facebook platform alone, but also means seeking the origin of the meme.

Based on the post Lydia shared, the Facebook group “Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children” created the original post. The fact that “Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children” uploaded the posts doesn’t necessarily mean they created the meme, but the meme did find its way to Lydia’s page through their group. Reading laterally encourages me to move beyond the meme that is in front

of me to click on Uncle Sam's Misguided Children's group page, a group described as a "clothing brand" and "community." More generally, Uncle Sam's Misguided Children is a community within the extremist group Oath Keepers, one of the largest radical antigovernment groups in the U.S. today (and which grew in popularity after Obama's election). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Oath Keepers is based on a set of baseless conspiracy theories about the federal government working to destroy the liberties of Americans ("Oath Keepers").

In my first encounter with this Facebook group, a direct messenger window automatically popped into the right-hand corner of the page, directing me to the Uncle Sam's Misguided Children online store and encouraging me to interact with their available merchandise (see figure 8).

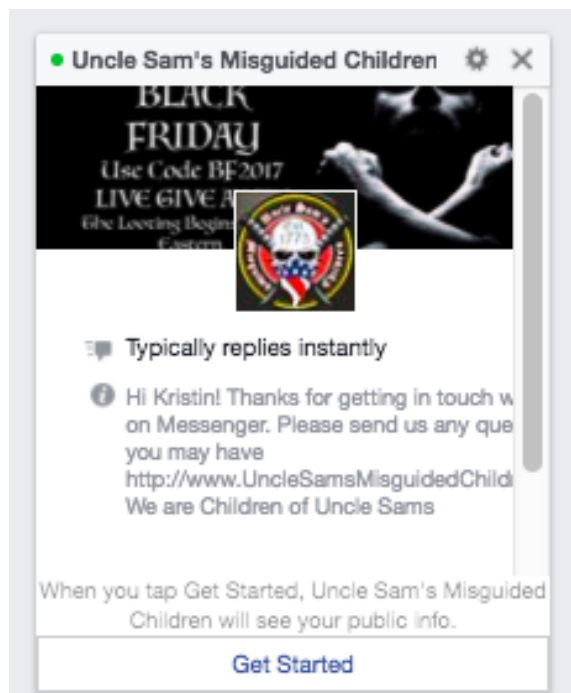


Figure 7: Uncle Sam's Misguided Children Facebook pop-up. [www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com). Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017

The link shared via automated direct message sent me to a storefront with radical right-wing t-shirts with strong Islamophobic undertones. Some of the shirts featured there include the slogans

“I am the infidel your imam warned you about” and “I refuse to Coexist with people who want to kill me” (see figure 9).

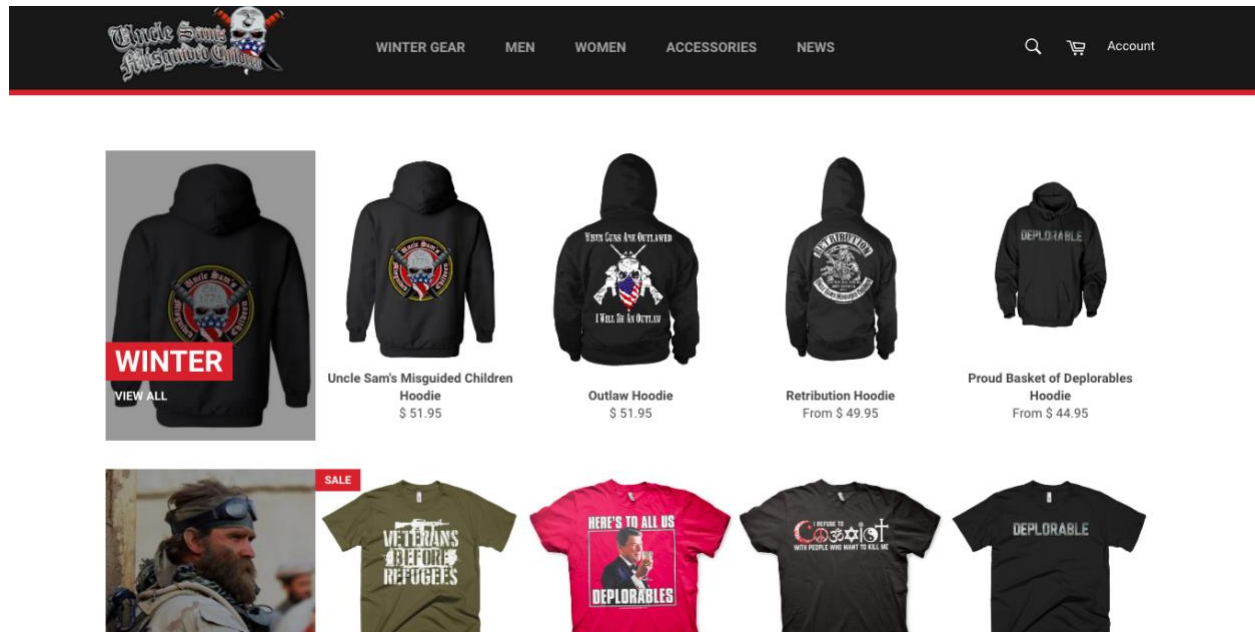


Figure 8: Screenshot of Uncle Sam's Misguided Children online store. <<https://unclesamsmisguidedchildren.com/>> Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017.

It is on this automated direct message feature I want to focus in particular, especially for the ways it speaks to how content is automated on Facebook.

Unknown to me, at the time I originally read Lydia's posts, Facebook was testing a new automated feature designed to encourage businesses to rely on Facebook messenger to answer potential customer inquiries. (By 2018, these pop-ups became a standard feature of the platform.) Because of the lack of transparency in how Facebook releases updates and makes changes to their site, even those in charge of answering questions about Facebook couldn't say anything about this feature, nor did they even seem to know about it ("Facebook Opens Messages Automatically"). While the automated message feature appears to have become a part of the standard interface (but again, there is no way to know this for sure as a casual user since

Facebook has not announced it within the platform), it speaks to how communication works within these networks: be it news story, group, meme, or image, it is reduced to equal footing with everything else. All these things have a value because everything is functioning within Facebook's business plan. That plan rests primarily on (1) obtaining and retaining users, (2) encouraging users to spend more time on Facebook (as opposed to other online places) and (3) finding new revenue opportunities..

Pop-up windows such as these are important since they create instances where users are more forcefully directed to an outside site from Facebook. The pop-up feature itself is also noisy (it beeps) and even a bit unexpected since popups aren't a regular Facebook feature. In this particular context, the automated pop-up feature takes on a dark tone, in that it almost seems like a wave or a way of grabbing a user by their arm and guiding them to more radicalized online content. These automated features are of course universal for all business pages on Facebook no matter what they sell, but when it creates an online context where radical political content is more accessible and there is no ethical filtering taking place, the social consequences cannot be ignored.

Lydia herself has not shopped on the Uncle Sam's Misguided Children site nor is she familiar with the group outside of the post she shared—I asked her directly to confirm this. She has not liked the group page at the time of this writing. So the question is, how might it have risen on her feed?<sup>5</sup> And perhaps just as important, what does this suggest about social media as a tool for political radicalization?

I, of course, can't see what Lydia's Facebook feed looks like to see how it varies from my own, but I can get a general idea from looking at public conservative posts and from

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<sup>5</sup> Both conservative and progressive leaning news sites have reported that Uncle Sam's Misguided Children was shut down at some point on Facebook for promoting racist posts, but as of March 2018 the group is still online.

Washington Post’s “Red Feed Blue Feed,” a page that reveals how issues related to immigration from Lydia’s feed look very different from my own based on how she has liked and interacted with political content on Facebook (see figure 10).

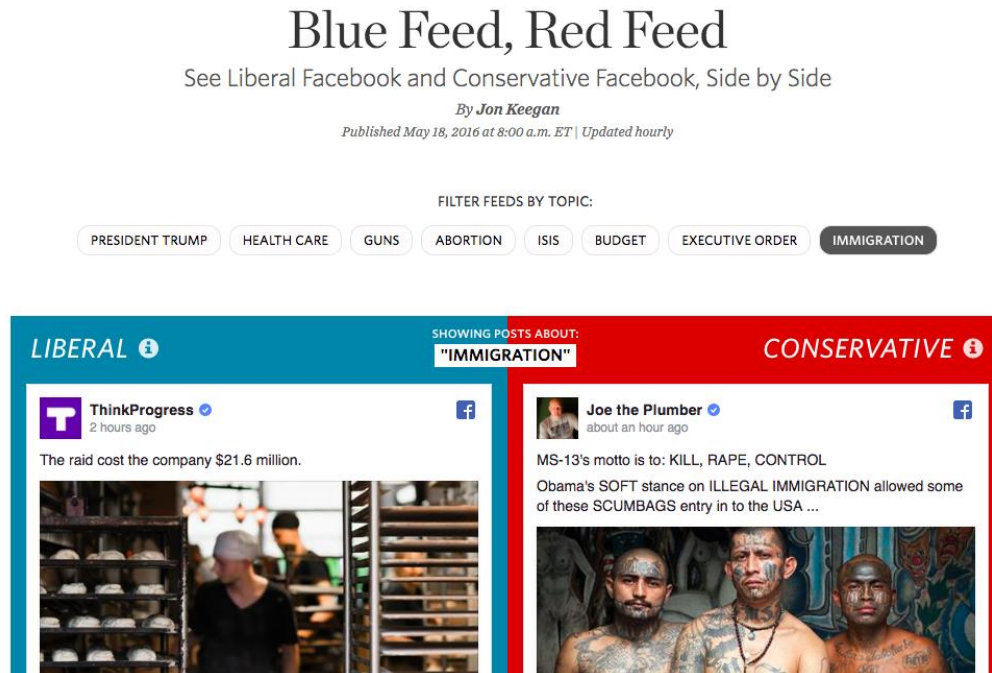


Figure 9: Top selection of “Red Feed, Blue Feed” homepage. <<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>> Retrieved 2 Feb. 2017.

Whereas my more progressive feed includes messages about helping immigrants and discussed immigration reform, her posts are about the problem immigrants pose for the economy and how they are threatening or dangerous.

Layer 3 draws attention to how Facebook’s for-profit model influences what communication is shared and how—and how that in turn can lead to political radicalization. The interface doesn’t make it clear to my friend that by sharing this post, she is helping promote a radical right-wing propaganda store and community with a clear history of racism. And due to

Facebook's issues with transparency, there is no way to verify the problematic history of the group or that it was once banned from Facebook.

Facebook's connection to other technologies rarely restricts the content that groups share once they are created. This not only creates a landscape of selling and information manipulation but also frames our relationships with radical anti-government groups on the same level as a local bakery or popular department store.

As I consider these layers in relation to one another, I begin to get a much denser understanding of the rhetorical situation of this post and the ways Facebook is designed to ignore certain ethical conditions. For instance, expanding concepts of authorship, or what counts as authoring, to represent the number of ways humans make the choices to engage with content on social media allows for a rhetorical understanding that prioritizes the accountability of users as they move through online, networked spaces and make choices to share, respond to, or remix texts. It is not just that another author is responsible for such a meme or its circulation, but that circulation via social media becomes a form of authorship in and of itself. Choosing to circulate a particular meme means drawing attention to certain ways of thinking and believing over others. Human responsibility, from this perspective, is bound to interaction and choice as opposed to being solely directed at the individual or individuals who created the meme in the first place.

Given that the third layer reveals the extent that a tendency toward political polarization is designed into this technological infrastructure, there is a degree to which all political memes are inherently violent, since the context of their sharing makes no possibility for yielding or passivity in social exchange. Political memes, especially when shared within the context of Facebook, invite a tendency toward reinforcing binary political ideologies and a "you are either



for us or against us” mentality. Such a defensive position leaves little room for one to acknowledge the limits of their own knowing.

Additionally, the three layers together illustrate the number of ways that Facebook as techno-material orients human choice. With traditional methods of rhetorical analysis centered on audience, context, and purpose through a human-subjective lens, it would not be possible to account for the machine-agency on Facebook, and in particular for the number of ways Facebook has been designed to run used outside of direct human intervention and oversight. For instance, Facebook provides asynchronous methods of written expression at the height of experiencing an emotional response. The design doesn’t encourage or invite thinking or reflection or researching before responding as much as it invites more immediate forms of authoring. There is no “take offline” or “move thread to a personal message” button or “research this” button or even “make a draft” button. We see then how a user on Facebook might be held accountable for the shared content while still acknowledging that the technology too has a role, since it inhibits certain practices required for ethical communication—especially given that the site values interacting with, and thus authoring, new content as quickly and frequently as possible as opposed to leaving time for processing new information.

The meme, the interface, Lydia, myself, Facebook’s programmers, and Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children are part of a shared community. The materiality of our technologies, the code creating the interface, the image of the meme all have a role in our potential to transformation and whether or not that transformation occurs through recrafting ourselves with one another, or through violence, force, or trickery. Unfortunately, the tendency of the design is to move one toward the latter.

Understanding this deeper ethical context doesn't take away the anger I have about the post and toward Lydia for her participation in its circulation, but by moving through these layers of analysis, I have the opportunity to consider the ethical effects of our technologies as they have been programmed by humans to run outside of direct human intervention. And with this time and space for processing, I can now see other creative possibilities for my response that resist those options that are most immediately available based on Facebook's design—comment, unfollow, unfriend.

### **Expanding Our Rhetorical Seeing Through a TSR Approach: Digital Accumulation and Consumption on and of Pinterest**

Every image of man is defined against other possibilities—thus, the idea of man as fundamentally economic is drawn against the idea of him as fundamentally political, loving, religious, ethical, social, moral, tribal, or something else. Even when one becomes hegemonic, it carves itself against a range of other possibilities—tactically arguing with them, keeping them at bay, or subordinating them. So it is not enough to know that humans are economic in their drives and motivations—we must know what this means we are not, especially what has been sent packing, what we are adamantly not.

— *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown (81)

In the analysis of Facebook, I used a TSR approach to describe the larger context of what it means to share and compose on social media platforms, looking especially at those invisible features of our technology that impact the possibility for ethical and rhetorical action. In that analysis, I stayed focused on information and perspectives readily available to most first-year students. In the following analysis, I show how a TSR approach can be woven together with other kinds of theories to deepen our understandings of how social media develop out of and reinforce existing contexts. In the following analysis, I bring in economic theories related to the notion of austerity capitalism in order to analyze Pinterest (an image-based social platform that allows users to save digital content into a visually appealing interface). By examining Pinterest's

layers through the perspective of austerity capitalism, I show how Pinterest—which on its face looks to be about owning as much as possible—supports the values that underpin corporations holding more power than humans and money moving from the poorest to the wealthiest.

Before I explain theories of austerity capitalism, I will describe Pinterest and a bit of its history, which shows how Pinterest developed in tune with the rise of austerity capitalism.

Pinterest primarily works like a visual bookmarking service that mimics the language of inspiration pin boards used, prior to digital times, by designers of various kinds. Instead of collecting fabric samples or photographs of rooms from magazines and pinning them to a board of some kind, Pinterest users “pin” online content onto virtual “boards.” Pinterest has gone through a number of infrastructural and interface-level design changes since the site’s original launch in 2010, yet despite these changes, users’ pins have consistently centered on home care and other forms of domestic labor (see figures 11–16).

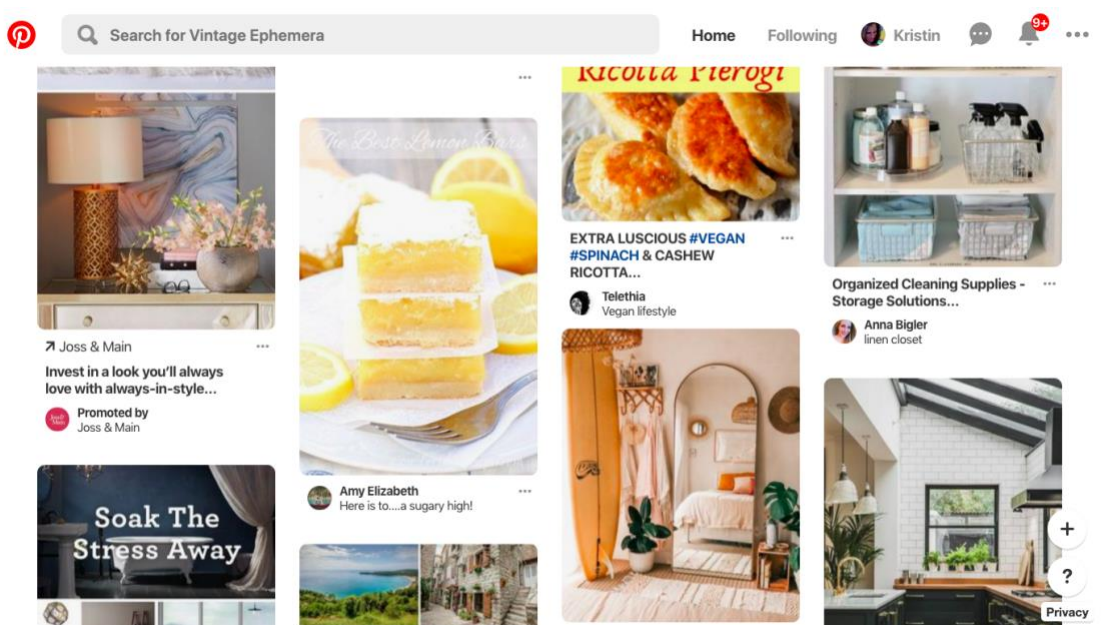


Figure 10: Pinterest homepage. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 19 May 2019.

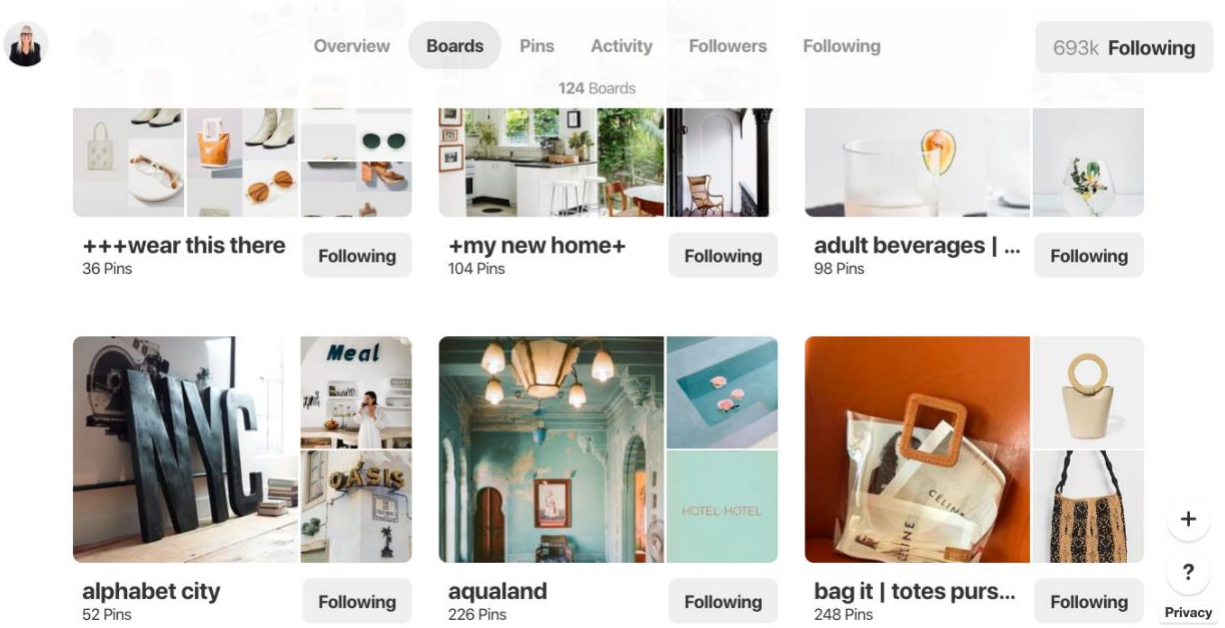


Figure 11: Example of user's board page. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 19 May 2019.

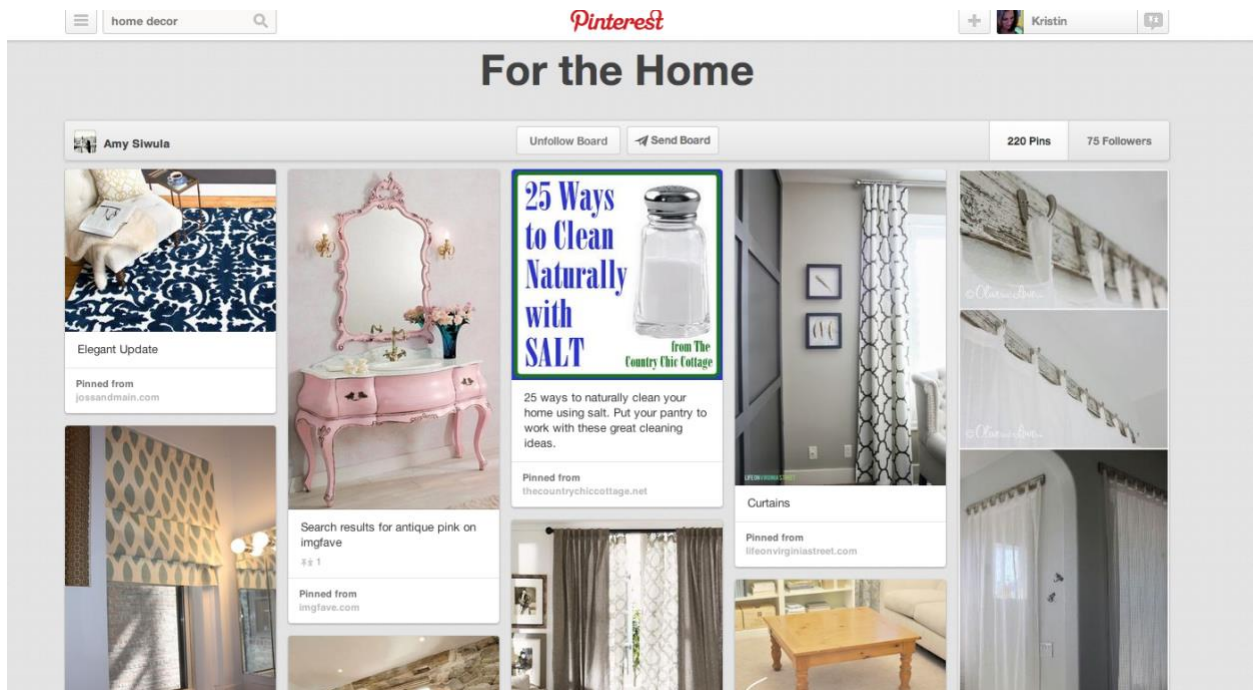


Figure 12: Pinterest homepage. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved March 2013.

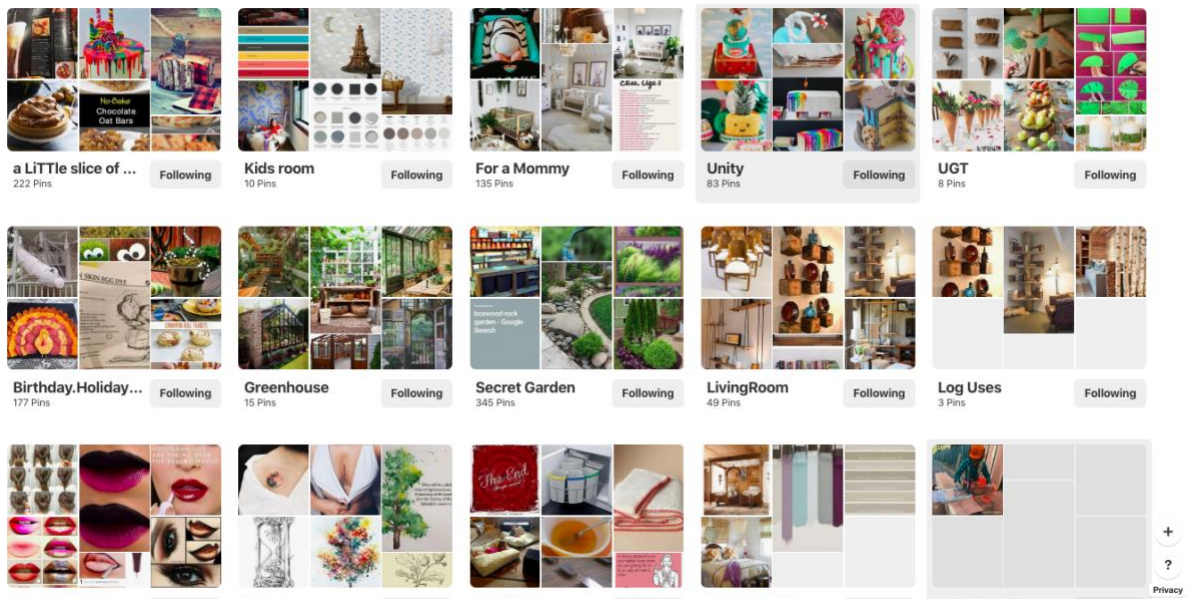


Figure 13: Example of user's board page. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 20 May 2019.

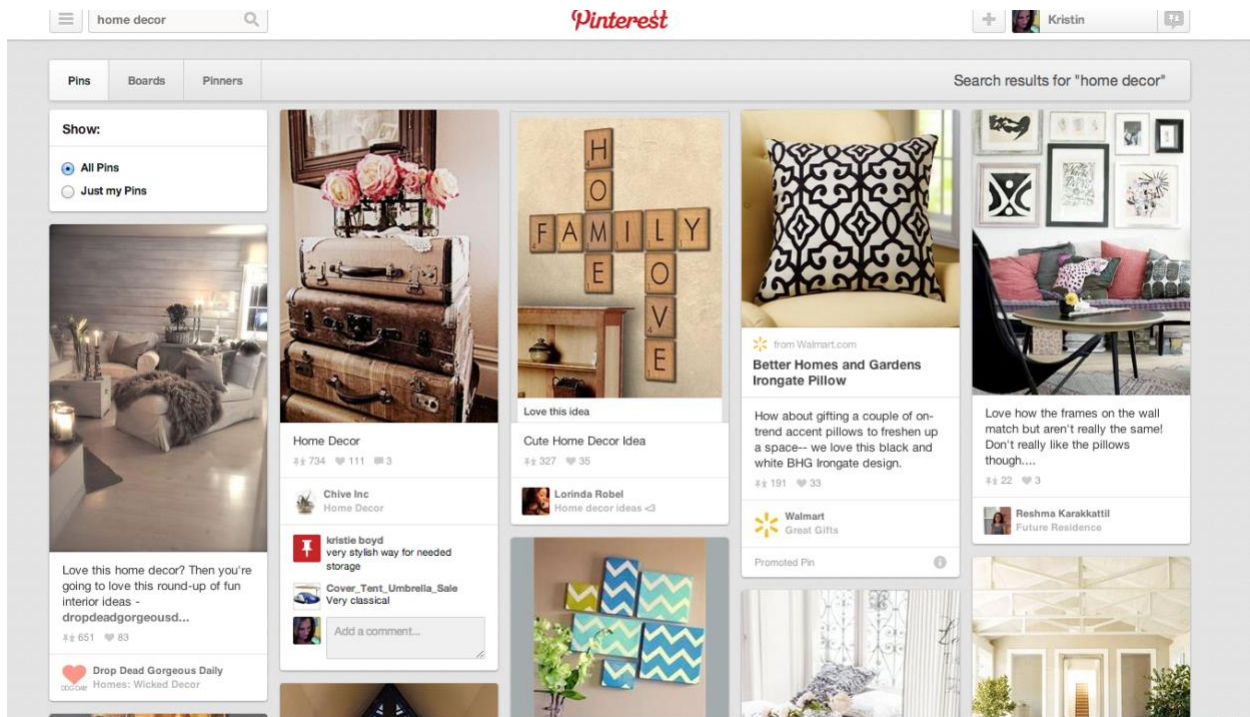


Figure 14: Example of home décor search on Pinterest. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 20 March 2013.

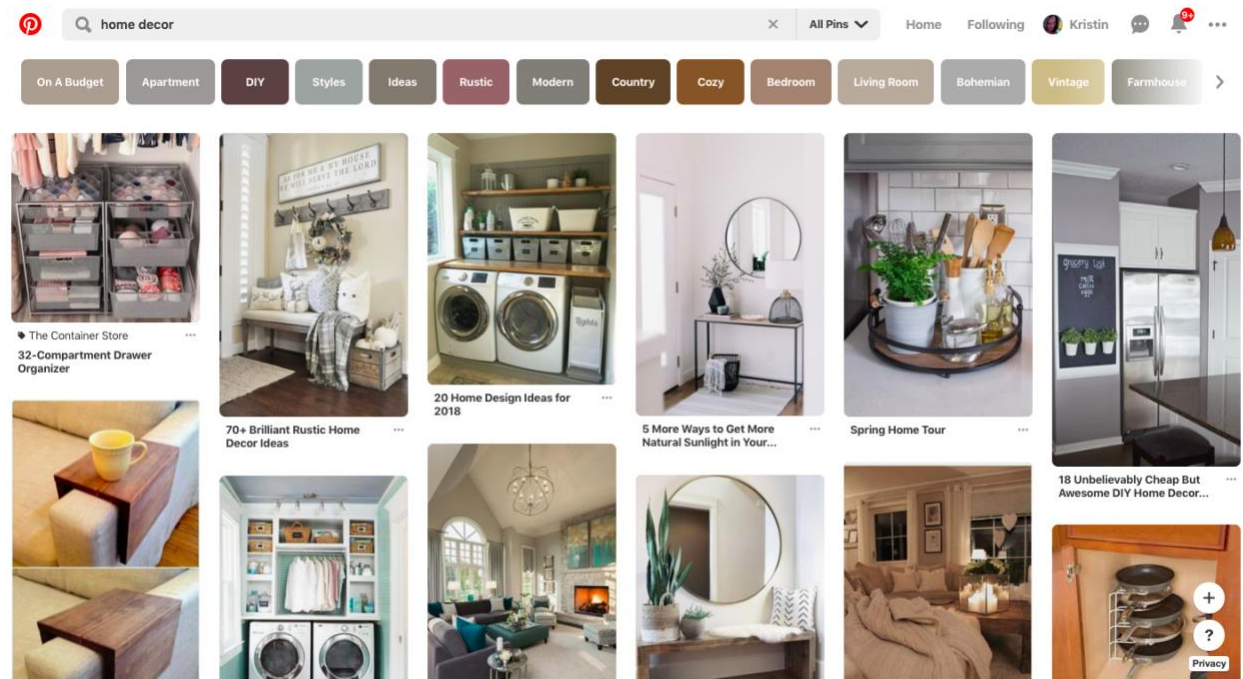


Figure 15: Example of home décor search on Pinterest. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 20 May 2019.

While domestic-themed boards are not the only boards on Pinterest, it is rare for a Pinterest user to *not* have some kind of board dedicated to meal planning, room arrangement advice, storage techniques, child-rearing techniques, cleaning methods, room arrangement inspiration, or DIY home projects. It is perhaps unsurprising then—especially given the gendered history of household chores and feminine labor—that the Pew Research Center reports that 40% of women who live in the United States reported that they used Pinterest compared to 16% of the men (“Who uses Pinterest, Snapchat, YouTube and WhatsApp”). Pinterest offers a place to imagine and plan a more ideal domestic life through pins such as how to meal prep for the week on a twenty-five dollar budget, how to receive the best deals when shopping, how to transform an old dresser drawer set into a modern television stand, or how to keep track of household cleaning. Given the action-based and practical content on Pinterest, the platform offers an alternative to other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that have recently been criticized for

the addicting ways they've been designed to "keep users online" and incite political division (Farrell; McCarthy). Pinterest's founder Ben Silberman has repeatedly positioned Pinterest as a form of "anti-social media," insisting that it has been designed "to get people offline and do the things they love" (Wattles). Pinterest's original slogan even promised that the site was for "a tool for collecting and organizing things you love."

While on the surface, Silberman's goal for the platform appears more responsible than other platforms and even worthy of admiration, I turn to explore the ethical difficulties underlying Pinterest as it supports carrying the economic logics of austerity capitalism into the domestic sphere. By austerity capitalism, as I next explain, I refer to the shared objectives of austere economic rationale and neoliberal capitalism.

In *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Mark Blyth describes a global turn to austerity and the detrimental effects austerity has had over the last century. Austerity, as defined by Blyth, is a state's "voluntary deflation" intended to restore competitiveness and balance the state budget by reducing domestic wages, prices, and public spending (2). In short, austerity refers to the policy of cutting the state's budget in order to promote growth. In cutting the state's budget, austerity rationale places the pressures of cutting the deficit on the shoulders of citizens, as they are forced to make do without certain state-sanctioned public provisions and to use their own self-efficacy, resilience, and grit to survive. Blyth argues that austerity policies thrive from statistical and distributional delusions that often end up hurting most those with the least wealth. As he writes:

Those at the bottom of the income distribution lose more than those at the top for the simple reason that those at the top rely far less on government-produced services and can afford to lose more because they have more wealth to start with. So, although it is true

that *you cannot cure debt with more debt*, if those being asked to pay the debt either cannot afford to do so or perceive their payments as being unfair or disproportionate, then austerity policies simply will not work. (8-9)

Austerity demands that the state, private institutions, and citizens reduce spending and balance the budget, but as Blyth describes, we cannot all be austere at once. If all institutions and citizens are austere, then everyone hoards resources: the government pulls back on providing money to public services, investors stop investing, and citizens stop consuming (8-9).

Austerity capitalism goes hand-in-hand with a neoliberal approach to capitalism. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberal capitalism is commonly understood as an ensemble of economic policies whose main goal is to affirm free markets. Freedom and democracy become conflated with the ability of businesses and corporations to strengthen competitive positioning and appreciate in value. Brown argues that the values of neoliberal capitalism have extended to all domains and activities of human life, including those personal and political domains where money is not often believed to be the primary goal (33). As Brown describes, neoliberal policies have included the

deregulation of industries and capital flows; radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable; privatized and outsourced public goods, ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries; replacement of progressive with regressive tax and tariff schemes; the end of wealth redistribution as an economic or social political policy; the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise, from baby adoptions to pollution rights, from avoiding lines to securing legroom on the airplane; and, most recently, the



financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in dynamics of economic of everyday life. (28)

Since neoliberal values have such a wide-spread reach into personal life, Brown suggests that they have a distinct effect on human subjectivity, reducing humans to only ever *homo oeconomicus*, valuable in terms of how they function as capital that can benefit, support, and work within a capitalist-based market (37-39).

Austere economic rationale is particularly deleterious within the current neoliberal capitalist context since there is no value or incentive to hold privatized institutions accountable for their actions. Such was the case when the 2008 Subprime Mortgage Crisis triggered the Great Recession. Under the guise of the economic vitality of a free market, banks were slowly deregulated<sup>6</sup>, which allowed them to unethically and irresponsibly approve subprime loans to citizens interested in owning (or remodeling) a home but who could not otherwise afford to do so. But housing prices went down and citizens could not pay back these loans—and foreclosures on homes hit record numbers. The financial institutions that provided mortgages to borrowers (including The Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, and Wells Fargo) as well as those that purchased mortgages on the secondary market (including Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac), were viewed as too big to fail and were bailed out by the government (“Bailout Recipients”). On the other hand, individual citizens, whose tax money went toward bailing out the financial institutions, were left to suffer through the lingering effects of the Great Recession: The effects ranged from high rates of unemployment and an increase in child poverty (Isaacs), negative

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<sup>6</sup> In 1999, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, also known as the Financial Services Modernization Act, repealed the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933. The repeal allowed banks to use deposits to invest in derivatives, including collateralized debt obligations (CDOs). The repayment of CDO’s are based on the promised repayment of the loan. CDOs were the main cause of the 2008 financial crisis because, when housing prices went down, home owners were unable to afford their mortgage and were forced to foreclose. (Amadeo)

health impacts and increased suicide rates (Margerison-Zilko et al.), and sharp increases in worry and stress and declines in positive affect (Deaton).

As Brown describes, neoliberal policies are not intended to support or plan for the well-being of the public. Instead, they are the opposite of planning—a process for facilitating the economic game but not directing or containing it (67).

Moreover, austerity, especially in an era of capitalism, is a purposeful contradiction in terms: as Owen Hatherley describes in *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, during austere times, citizens are encouraged to sacrifice by making hard choices or by muddling through under the story that there is not enough money to go around. At the same time consumers are asked to muddle through, however, they are also asked to enrich themselves on their own, to “buy their house, get a car, make something of themselves, ‘aspire’” (14). Such contradictory messages during a time of economic crisis are especially disorienting, leading to, as Hatherley argues, citizens longing for stability within a deeply insecure world. This “austerity nostalgia,” according to Hatherley, takes the form of a rustic or retro aesthetic that seeks antique tins and figurines, records, old-fashioned moustaches, and craft beer. Austerity nostalgia occurs when a desire for security is sought through the fetishizing of material objects that stand for a past time, even though this is a longing for a past that doesn’t exist. Hatherley suggests that the popularized “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster, originally designed in post-WWII Britain but never mass produced until 2008 during the subprime mortgage crisis, was an embodiment of all the contradictions of the austerity aesthetic in that the message demanded one to alleviate their own anxieties and to simply aspire and carry forward (15) (see figure 17).



Figure 16: “Keep Calm and Carry On” World War II Motivational Poster. Wikimedia Commons <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keep-calm-and-carry-on.svg>>.

Given Pinterest’s emphasis on and the popularity of domestic-themed content on the site, it’s worth tracing austerity capitalism’s impact—beginning with the liberal turn to the commodification of domestic labor—on the domestic sphere. Iris Marion Young describes in her chapter “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme” that more women entered the labor force (especially during the 1960s) partly because the income of one person, the husband, was no longer sufficient to make home payments: “Ironically,” Young continues, “all the adults now stay away from the house for most hours of the week in order to earn the money for the house in which they invest their sense of self” (143). As more women left domestic commitments to participate in the workforce, they were no longer able to dedicate the time and energy to what has traditionally been defined as *women’s work*. In *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, Arlie Hochschild describes how the rise of feminism under liberalism has created a growing supply of commercial services that are designed to meet the demands of home that were historically relegated to women. According to Hochschild, the commodity frontier, on one hand, involves a

growth of companies that expand market niches for goods and services that were once a part of unpaid “family life” and, on the other hand, involves families who feel the need to consume these goods and services: “On the company side a growing supply of services is meeting a growing demand for ‘family’ jobs” (35-36). In ideal circumstances, domestic chores are delegated to specialized consumer services. Families pay other, non-family, individuals and companies to clean the house, take care of children, shop for groceries, and prepare meals. But in an era of austerity capitalism, specifically after the great recession, these consumer services become no longer affordable and therefore no longer feasible: citizens are forced to “be more responsible” through cost-cutting strategies such as using their time to complete their own domestic labor. They must cook at home rather than order out, they must coupon to save on groceries, and they must tend to their children’s needs themselves, unable to hire a care-worker. Since such domestic labor was traditionally viewed as a women’s responsibility, austerity measures often impact women unequally: they are tasked with working full-time jobs (that allow for the basic necessities such as food and shelter) while at the same time they are held as accountable for keeping up the home.

Given that history of austerity capitalism and neoliberalism, especially as those two economic approaches touch on women’s work, I turn to my analysis of Pinterest by focusing on the following values that develop out of the logics of austerity and neoliberalism: To feel that they fit in the world in austere times, women feel asked to value domesticity and the keeping of a tasteful home, to take care of themselves and not ask others (institutions or individuals) for help, and to save money.

I offered the history above to explain austerity capitalism but also to share the context that led to the Pinterest. While there is a cultural tendency to tell narratives that exaggerate the

success of social media companies and that center on the story of the technological genius of an individual man, I diverge from such narratives—before I analyze a user’s experience of Pinterest—in order to tell a story of the birth of a platform during a global economic crisis that saw austerity capitalism as the solution.

In a keynote speech given at the Alt Summit in 2012, Ben Silbermann, CEO of Pinterest, told his story of platform success: after working for Google and never being allowed to create his own content, he quit his job in pursuit of building his own platform. A week after he quit in September 2008, the subprime mortgage crisis triggered a recession that threatened the economic stability of the nation. For Silbermann’s story specifically, this made it challenging for him to find investors (“Ben Silbermann Keynote Address at Alt Summit”). Unsurprisingly, Silbermann’s speech at the Alt Summit continues in typical, Ragged Dick, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” fashion, popular of American narratives: Silbermann works hard, doesn’t listen to “no,” and succeeds with his business despite limited resources. By January 2010, Pinterest was officially launched—while the world was still spinning from record numbers of foreclosures and with unemployment still on the rise. Pinterest’s growth in popularity and its transformations over time, as I illustrate below, correlate with the pressures that I described above, pressures for women to attend to that work that has traditionally been relegated as their labor at home.

In the following, I turn to a TSR approach in order to illustrate how Pinterest’s content, design, and technological infrastructure support the values of domesticity, individuality and self-help, and saving money.

#### Pinterest Layer 1: A Composer’s Relationship to Other People through a Text

How Pinterest’s design supports the logics of austerity capitalism starts with who and what count as *authors* on Pinterest. Whereas Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat all encourage users

to post and develop their own content as well as to remix or offer commentary on others' content, the relations Pinterest encourages between composer and audience are much less active: users most typically *author* through posting content that has already been posted online or content that has already been posted to Pinterest by others. Such passivity in authoring asks users to connect not with others, as I will argue, but rather with themselves and what they aspire to be domestically; in addition, this passivity helps users uncritically accept the contradictory logics of austerity, so that users seek what is expensive and tasteful at the same time that they learn to do-it-themselves.

Pinterest's approach to authoring means that users' pin boards are therefore often a collection of images from online stores, the blogging community, Google image search, and other online media publications. Importantly, among users there is no emphasis to author through response to posted content outside of simply reposting again. This isn't to say "pinning" is the only form of authoring, as Pinterest users have the space to compose a brief description of a pin. Most descriptions users write, when they choose to write them, explain what the pinned item is for, practically, rather than offering any form of critical response. For example, a user may write, "I plan to bake this casserole for the family reunion," but she won't discuss or debate how a casserole is to be baked. Other times, users choose to let the description be automated since Pinterest will automatically fill in the descriptions to images based on how they have been labeled by those who create the content for websites.

A description written in alphabetic text is required for all Pinterest images and always has been. At the original launch of the site in 2010, user-authored descriptions of pinned images were a requirement and instructions for what to write were provided in the Pinterest "Welcome" all users received at the time. Currently, this requirement has since fallen away, and now it is

much more normal to depend on automated descriptions, especially when a user is pinning from a website that has a larger budget for crafting descriptions that are Pinterest-worthy (see figure 18).



Figure 17: Automated description on Pinterest from the Food Network site. Retrieved 20 May 2019.

The textual bodies produced by Pinterest pins are often limited to two key components: a single image and the automated or user-authored text below it. While users may be able to author responses through a public-facing comment or a private message to another’s pinned image, users use such features far less often.

Given the limitations on authoring content and the ways that authoring tends to involve reposting existing images, Pinterest tends to invite less politically overt or divisive content than other platforms. I don’t mean to suggest that Pinterest users strive to be politically neutral, as there are several users who use Pinterest as a content-storage site for political memes. For example, in the *Kairos* article “Can We Block These Political Thingys? I Just Want to Get

f\*cking Recipes,” Katherine DeLuca illustrates how many users see Pinterest as a space for civic and rhetorical engagement. However, such use of the platform is infrequent. For the most part, when users are talking to one another, either through the comment feature or the direct message feature, it is to affirm or admire the aesthetics of one another’s pin rather than to critique, debate, or offer links to other outside content (see figure 19).

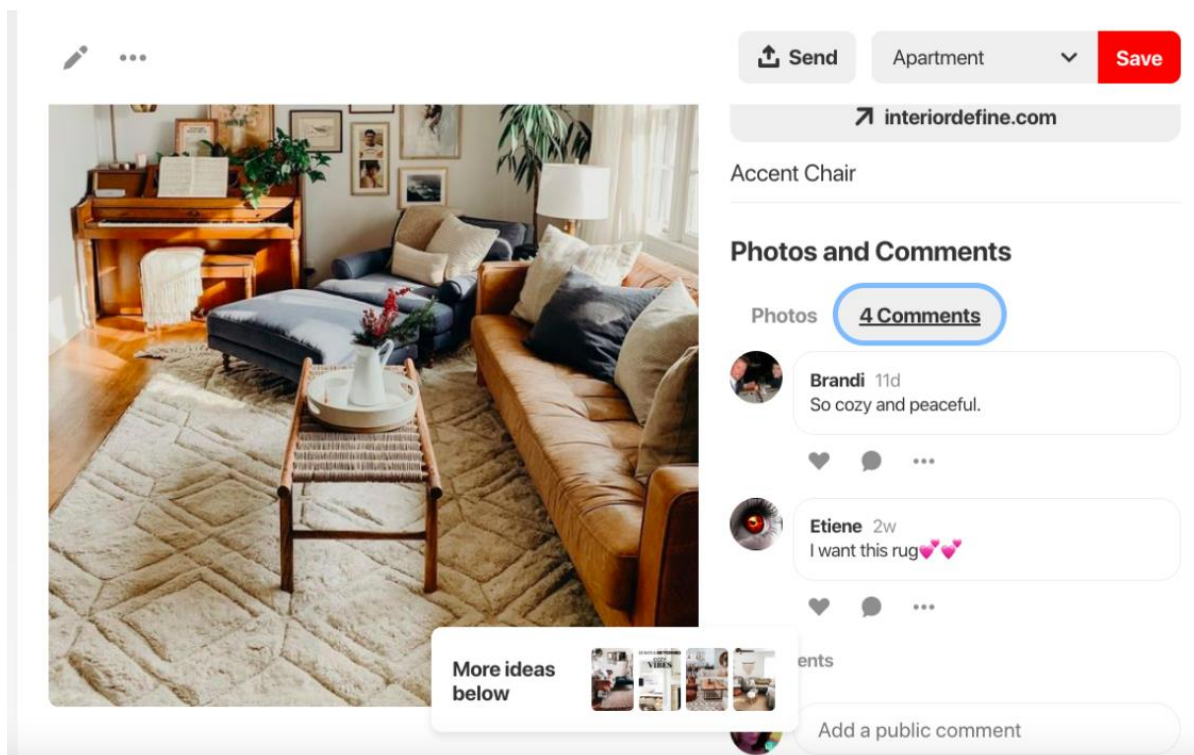


Figure 18: Example of comments in response to a user’s pin. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 20. May 2019.

In this way, Layer 1 on Pinterest is a lighter version of authoring than what occurs in other popular social media platforms, and the content is less about connecting users with other users and is instead more individualistic, self-involved, and focused on connecting users with themselves and what they aspire to be domestically. And while users must have a certain degree of affluence that would allow them the time, technology, and money to participate on social media, through pinning, there is also a degree of erasing socio-economic difference: what one



pins does not have to be fiscally reasonable since what one pins is not restricted to what one earns. Pinning, after all, signals an *aspiring toward* rather than a having or doing.

I've described already how content on Pinterest is often focused on the domestic sphere, so what the self aspires to be may be someone who commits to growing and canning their own vegetables, who is better skilled at purchasing and applying makeup, who completes at-home fitness work-outs, who uses their time to clean their house more efficiently, or who has a well-decorated home "no matter what budget." These forms of do-it-yourself (DIY) pins and other pins focused on self-education are one of the primary uses of the site.

Educational content on upkeeping the home has long been connected to the trends that are part of changing communicative technologies and the economies connected to them. For instance, Iris Marion Young describes how home magazines encourage one to imagine and created a staged home life (144). The values of such magazines demonstrate that it is not enough to have a home but that one must also purchase things for it, keep it tidy, and ensure the aesthetic is in good taste. In the early 2000s, shows like *Trading Spaces* and *Moving Up* demonstrated how, within a short amount of time, everyday individuals' homes could be remodeled and decorated into spaces worthy of any home magazine cover. Shawn Shimpach's article "Realty Reality" describes how, through HGTV, one learns how to *properly* home-own: One views the transformation of ugly, unorganized houses into representations of dream homes that, at least during the time of the filming, are tidy, clean, and beautiful. Any neglect of the home, especially in how such neglect is framed in shows like *Hoarders* or *Clean Sweep*, often becomes not only a symbol of domestic neglect but of the illegitimate, undeserving, and lazy citizen (521). From such television shows, the home—once a private space shared exclusively with family, neighbors, and friends—transforms into a public spectacle where individuals are encouraged to

“empower” themselves by first imaging home as a visual, dream-like spectacle and then by actualizing that dream through material possessions and organization—or, at least, through collecting those items and practices in Pinterest.

While home-related magazines and television shows draw on values of consumption, ordinariness, and private life to stage the home improvement and the ideology of domesticity of others, the networked, content-sharing emphasis of Pinterest offers users a heightened level of interactivity for composing and conforming to particular ideologies of domesticity. These ideologies are noticeable through attending to the features and trends in the content shared on Pinterest, especially in terms of how such content frames the opportunities and responsibilities of the domestic sphere. While users do have the option to pin to their own tastes, making it seem as though there is an infinite number of ways to pin, certain content tends to circulate in the Home Feed more often: for example, the home-decorating related pins have a fairly homogenized aesthetic across many user boards; the homes often have white or neutral walls, coordinate two colors only, and are well-organized. Their style might be described as minimal, mid-century modern with a touch of vintage bohemian or rustic. Such shared-aesthetic taste among users on the site tends to replicate the types of design found in a West Elm, Crate and Barrel, or Pottery Barn catalogue (see figures 20–22).



Figure 19: From the Crate and Barrel 2019 May Collection. <https://view.publitas.com/crate-barrel/2019-may-collection/page/38-39>. Retrieved 27 May 2019.

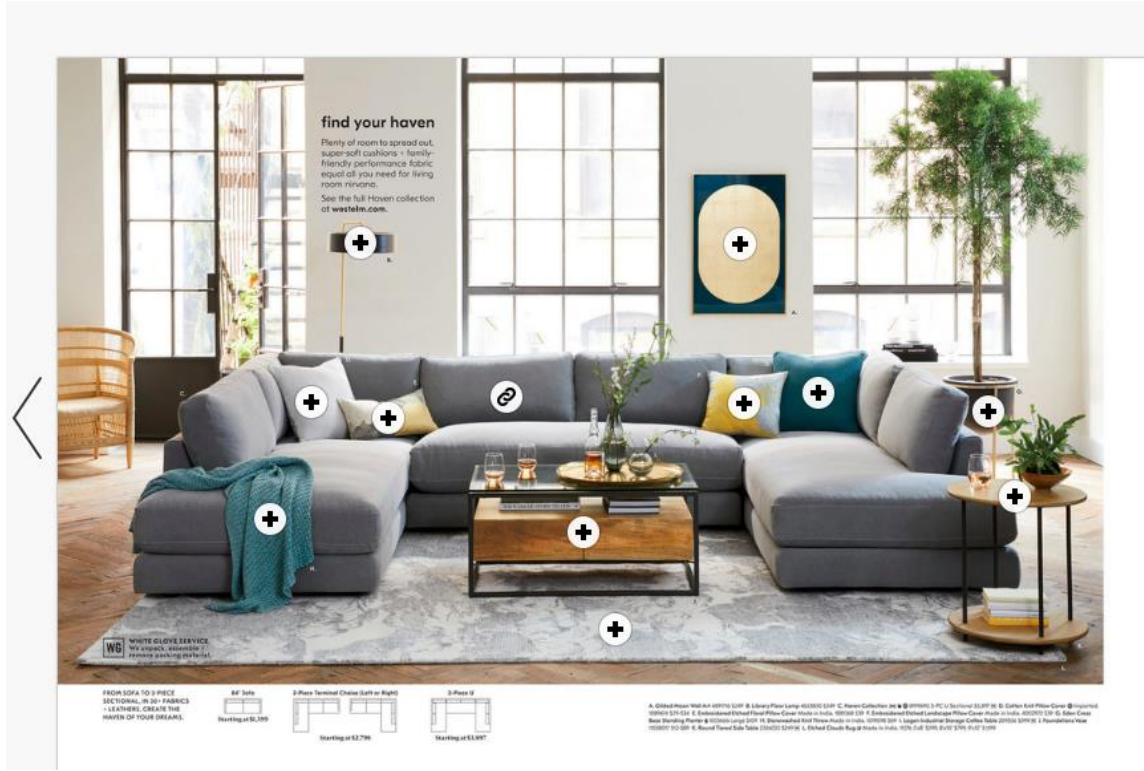


Figure 20: From the West Elm 2019 March Catalog. <https://www.westelm.com/pages/we-catalog>. Retrieved 27 May 2019.

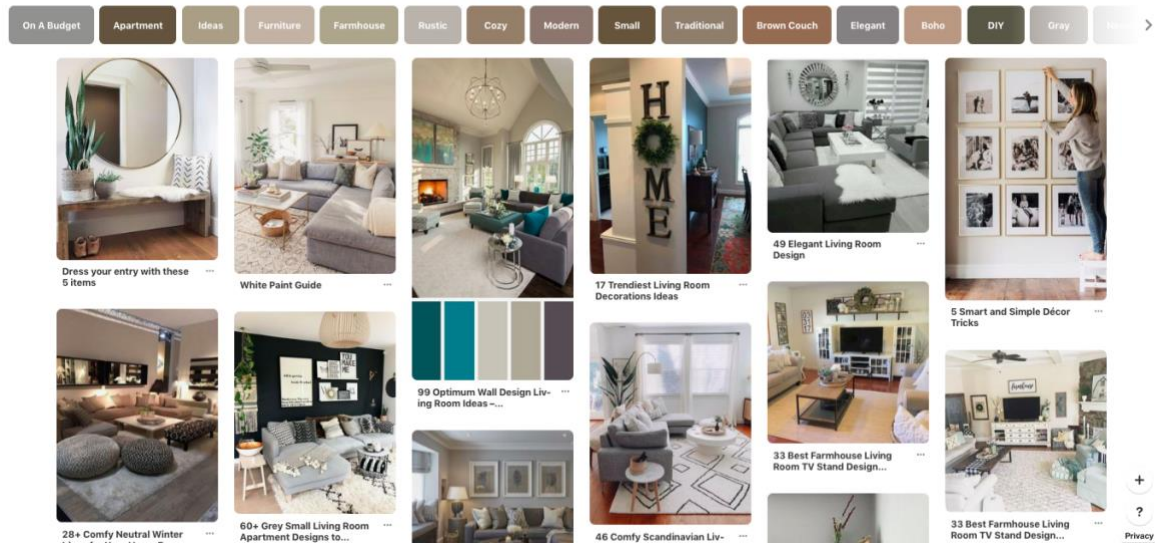


Figure 21: Top image of Pinterest when search “living room décor”. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 27 May 2019.

Moreover, many of the popular furniture companies tend to create new products in an industrialized process that gives an aged, worn, re-used, or rustic aesthetic to them. For example, a blanket ladder, a throwback to past when handmade quilts and blankets were often displayed, is presented as means to creatively decorate one’s living space (see figure 23) or a television console table is purposely surfaced to appear as though it is an antique (see figure 24).

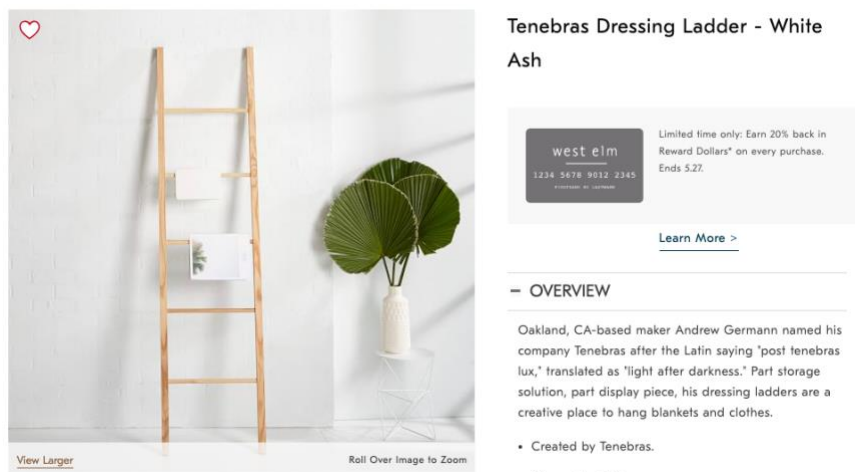


Figure 22: Decorative ladder available for purchase from West Elm. [www.westelm.com/products/lc1-tenebras-dressing-ladder-white-ash-h1395/](http://www.westelm.com/products/lc1-tenebras-dressing-ladder-white-ash-h1395/) Retrieved 27 May 2019.

POTTERY BARN BABY KIDS TEEN Williams-Sonoma | WS Home | west elm | Rejuvenation | Cultivate | Mark and Graham

POTTERY BARN MY ACCOUNT TRACK YOUR ORDER ship to:

ADVICE & INSPIRATION | NEW | REGISTRY Search keyword or item # > CART CHECKOUT

FURNITURE OUTDOOR RUGS & WINDOWS BEDDING BATH LIGHTING DECOR & PILLOWS TABLETOP HOLIDAY GIFTS SALE LET US CALL YOU

← Back to Media Stands & Consoles



**AIDEN MEDIA CONSOLE**  
new

~~\$1,299~~  
**SPECIAL \$1,099**  
Delivery Surcharge: \$75

1

**ADD TO CART** [ADD TO REGISTRY](#)

▼ OVERVIEW

Meticulous hand finishing gives this console the patina of an antique. Yet its design is ideal for modern media storage, with an adjustable shelf in each cabinet and wire management openings in the shelves and back.

- 55" wide x 18" deep x 30" high
- Holds up to a 50" flat-screen TV.
- Crafted with a solid hardwood frame.
- Configured with four drawers for CDs and DVDs, and two cabinets each with an adjustable shelf.
- Includes cord cutouts in back of cabinets for wire

Figure 23: Television available for purchase from Pottery Barn. [www.potterybarn.com](http://www.potterybarn.com). Retrieved 20 May 2013.

Along with these pins of purchasable products from home catalogues, users also often share DIY pins that link to instructions for how to build their own products that resemble the industrialized products available for purchase (see figures 25 and 26).

Send Apartment Save

### DIY Blanket Ladder under \$10

Domestically Speaki...  
265.7k followers Follow

domestically-speaking.com

DIY Blanket Ladder for less than \$5 a great tutorial and an easy project to add a great piece of organizational decor to your home.

Published October 27, 2016  
Written by Maryann @ Domestically Speaking

#### Photos and Comments

9 Photos 16 Comments

Tried this Pin? Add a photo to show how it went Add photo

Domestically Speaking 138k  
saved to Bloggers' Best DIY Ideas  
DIY Blanket Ladder for less than \$5 in lumber!!!! Great step by step tutorial so you can make your own!

Figure 24: Example of DIY pin to make a decorative ladder on Pinterest. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 27 May 2019.

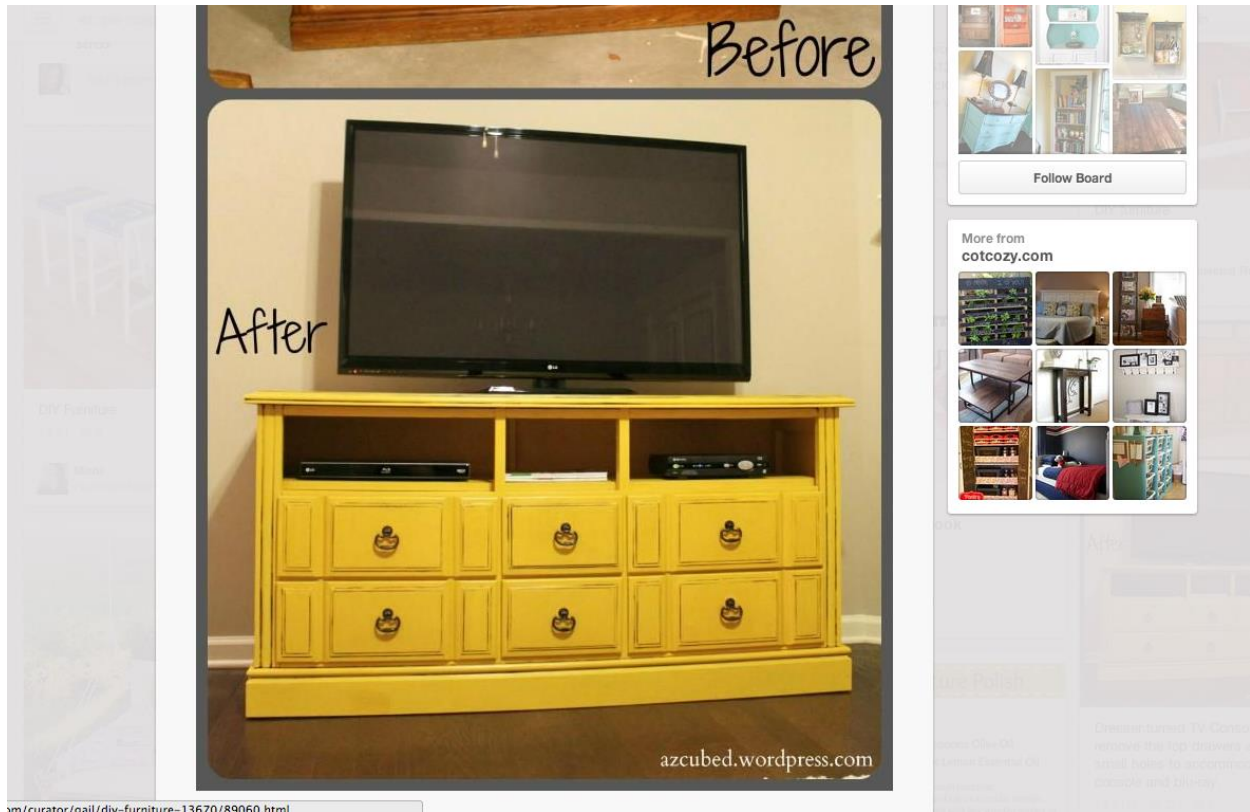


Figure 25: Example of DIY pin for a television stand. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 20 March 2013.

In this way, the authoring on the site tends to replicate the contradictory values of neoliberal austerity, where users demonstrate the pressures of decorating a home in good taste through purchasable products while at the same time they seek ways to cut costs by using inexpensive or recycled materials. Additionally, through pinning, one is able to look inward and dwell in a nostalgia of things. Through pinned content, one can see domestic commitments not as a financial or laborious burden, but instead as achievable—if one only employs the right strategies by pinning the right things.

By analyzing the first layer of Pinterest, I hope I have shown how the social media site encourages users to conceive of themselves as isolated selves, at home, on their own to make do—while seeking what everyone else appears to seek and value.

Pinterest Layer 2: A Composer' Relationship With the Platform Interface: Pinterest Interface Design, Affectual Awareness, and Self-reflection within digital environment

Now that I've described the typical user content on Pinterest in terms of how it relates to domestic labor and ideologies, I now focus on that content within the context of Pinterest's templated design. This design, I argue, continues to ask users to step into behaviors and attitudes supporting austerity capitalism: users who no longer have the resources to consume still seek an identity through consumption, but now through *idealized consumption*, through still continuing to value economic exchange, accumulation, and growth over all else in the endless pictured objects of Pinterest's landscape.

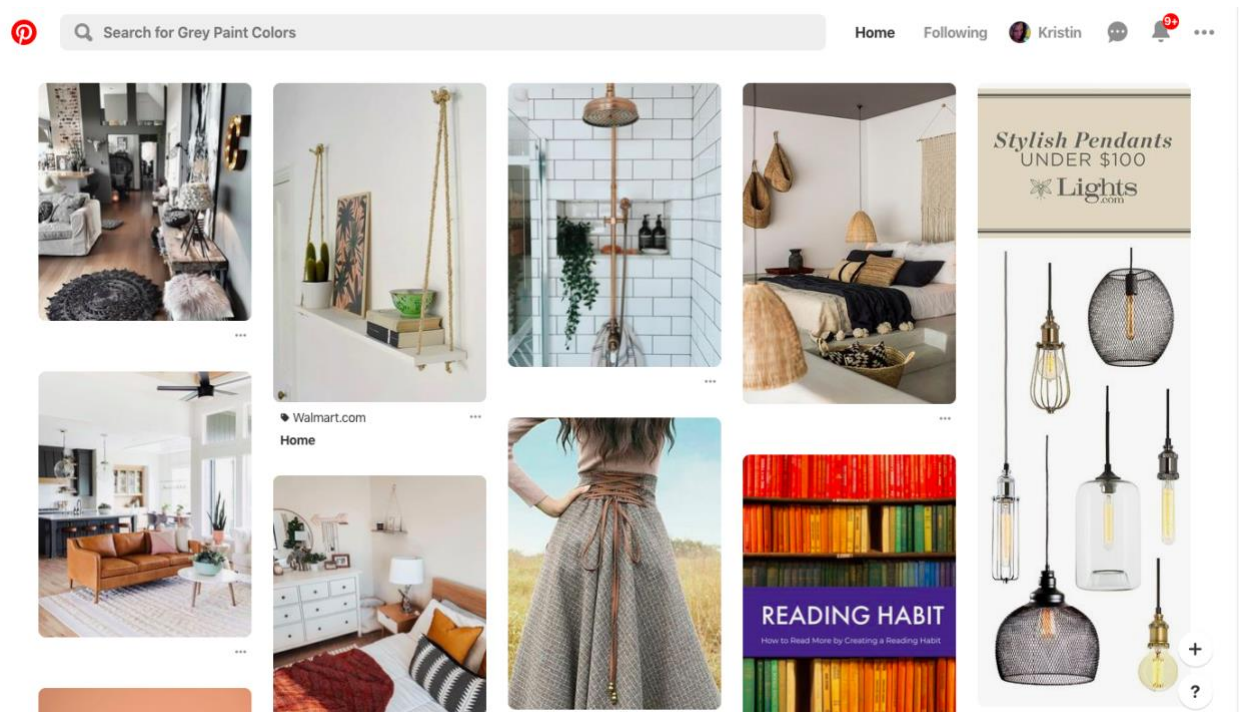


Figure 26: Pinterest Homepage. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 27 May 2019.

One the most notable features of Pinterest's interface is the minimalist grid display that makes up the feed (see figure 27). Outside of the header bar, which includes a small Pinterest



logo, a search bar, and a means to navigate the site, the rest of the site is neat, white, and organized primarily through rectangular images. The feed makes up the most significant portion of the page, emphasizing the images of pinned items that vary slightly in size and scale but fit neatly together. An individual's board feed features the same minimalist design: each board features a title and a glimpse at some of the pinned items. There is no hierarchical organizational structure to these images, and—although users are provided with the ability to click and drag pins into a preferred order on the pinboard<sup>7</sup>—no such option is available on the feed.

There is a certain intimacy to this space not found in other social media platforms: there are no trending pages, hashtags, or throwbacks to past pins. There is a timeless feel to the design since nothing is marked chronologically, and there aren't time-makers telling when a pin was authored. Pinterest is designed to be more a space of discovery, a place to browse and view, as though one is walking through a library or museum. The design feels quiet, even peaceful. There is a comfort and calm in Pinterest collecting, as the site moves what is seemingly disorderly into a boxed and scrollable order.

Unlike other social media platforms where users are invited through the interface design to describe themselves in a profile and post their own experiences, within the Pinterest template users have fewer options for becoming visible: the template allows for a small profile image, but outside of the image, there is no section for users to describe themselves, their histories, their identities, their likes, or their basic demographic information. Instead, Pinterest's explorative, dream-like space invites users to cultivate a sense of identity through the urges and desires they have toward images and objects.

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<sup>7</sup> The ability to move pins in an order was a feature that was added to the site several years after its launch.

Although Pinterest presents itself as an affirming space for reflection and DIYing, it also has a high degree of promoted content and advertisements integrated into the site, influencing user's pinned content as well as how users are 'taught' to use the site and for what purposes. Around 2012, Pinterest began to make changes to the site that would help the platform develop stronger relationships with businesses. For example, in October of that year, Pinterest created special accounts for businesses that would better allow companies to market and advertise on the site. Large businesses were able to create boards that looked just like all the other user boards on the site, meaning that users could follow businesses and pin their content, which always linked to the store's shopping page where that content could be purchased (see figure 28).

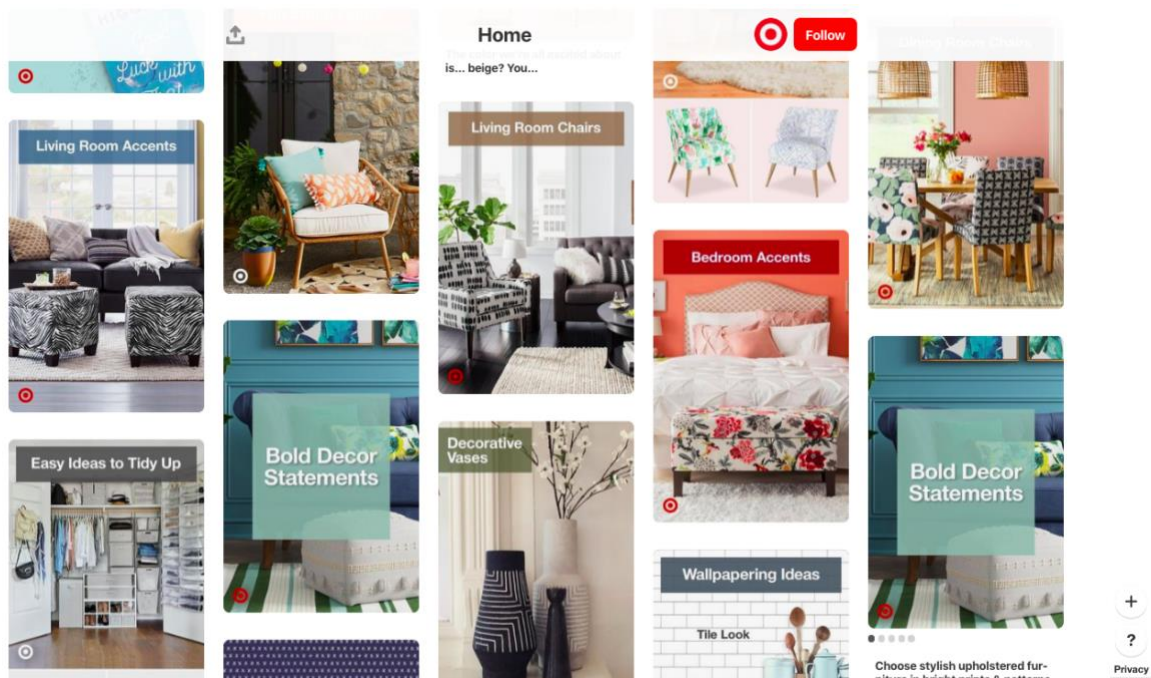


Figure 27: Image of Target's Home Board. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 29 May 2019.

In 2015, Pinterest introduced promoted pins, the only kind of explicit advertising on Pinterest (and by "explicit," I mean that a business paid to have the content shared as opposed to users searching or finding it on their own). Promoted pins, just like company user profiles, blend

seamlessly into the rest of the grid interface. Unlike platforms such as Facebook or Snapchat, there is no special allocated space for advertisements anywhere else on Pinterest’s template. The design makes advertising on the site less noticeable and less intrusive for users. In the beta version, promoted pins were even indecipherable from regular users’ pins with the exception of a “promoted” description written in exceedingly small print. The only way you could tell if a pin was promoted was if you hovered over the pin and read the explanation provided below the image (see figure 29). Since then, however, promoted pins have been made a more visible, and now users are able to see a “promoted by” description where a user’s name would normally go (see figures 30 and 31).

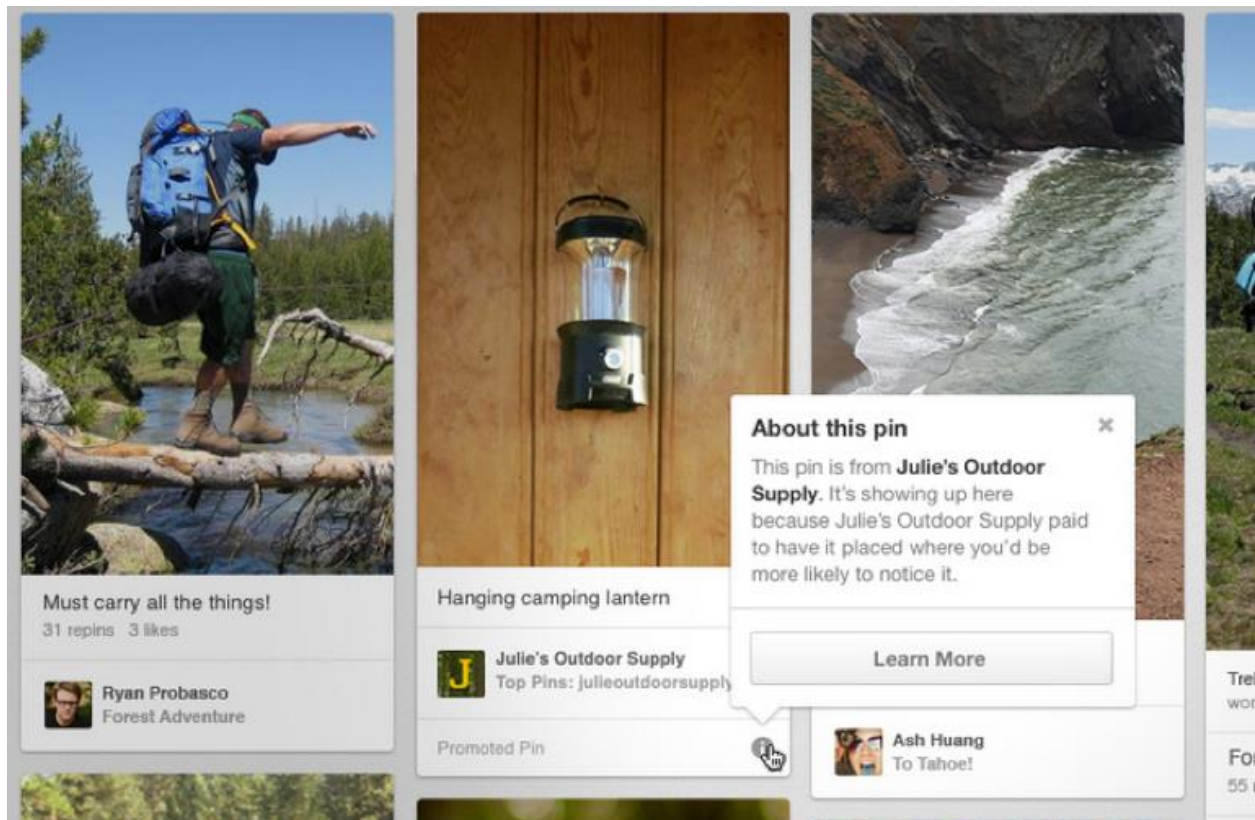


Figure 28: Pinterest “Promoted Pin” beta version, showing how a user had to hover over a pin to learn that a pin came from a business. <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pinterest-ads\\_n\\_4078527](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pinterest-ads_n_4078527)>

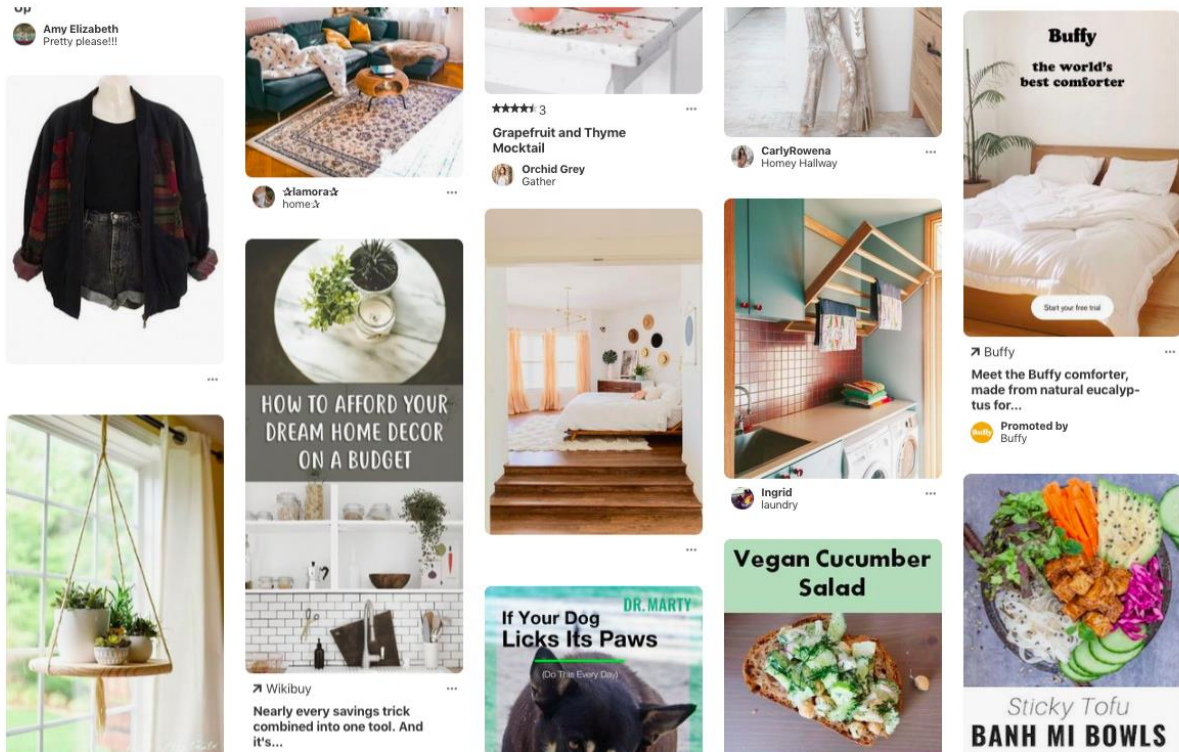


Figure 29: Example of Pinterest 2019 promoted pin on home page. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 27 May 2019.

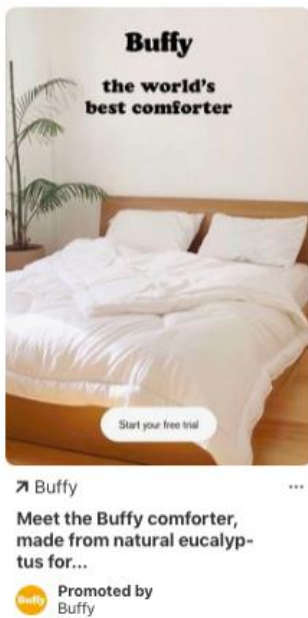


Figure 30: Zoomed in example of 2019 Pinterest promoted pin. [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Retrieved 27 May 2019.

Currently, most of the images associated with promoted pins appear no different than other, user-authored, content on Pinterest, and users are able to pin them to their individual pinboards just like they would any other pin available on Pinterest. Additionally, it is so common for users to pin purchasable items on Pinterest, the addition of promoted content doesn't seem out of place and does not disrupt regular user engagement on the site. Promoted content appears just as any other content would and may be engaged with as any other content or purchasable items that may be shared on the site.

In Baudrillard's critique of capitalism in *System of Objects*, he writes that "individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own" (15). Likewise, in Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping*, she describes the "shopper's gaze," characterizing it as the movement of shopping for necessity versus shopping for identity formation, which began with the development of department stores (4). Pinterest flips this idea of shopping for identity, since—on Pinterest as in the logics of austerity—it is not necessarily through consumption that individual are actualized; it is rather through one's *imagined* possibility to consume that one is actualized: one's idealized self would be able to consume and fulfill their civic responsibility in market exchange through purchasing power. Pinterest works within the desires of the shopper's gaze by providing users the opportunity to contemplate what they would like to purchase or save to purchase for 24/7.

The decision to pick and discover digital things, even through pinning things that are impractical or unaffordable for a user, also gives the illusion that through the digital thing one is moving toward particular goals. The repeatability of searching and pinning and scrolling on Pinterest offers a comforting distraction from a user's real-world situation: if one's home is being taken away, if it is a cluttered mess, if it is without "tasteful" design, a user on Pinterest is able to

imagine other possibilities through pinning. From this perspective, pinning is aspirational consumerism, allowing citizens to long for objects that, when purchased, have the potential to restore the health of the economy.

Another key feature of Pinterest as an interface is how vast it is: there are seemingly no limits on what one can pin or add to a pinboard, making much of the information too overwhelming to put into actual practice. Instead, content becomes hoarded on the interface: users pin more recipes than they can make, more DIY cleaning solutions than they need, and more items than they will ever have an opportunity to purchase. When one does have time to make a specific recipe, it's not easily trackable: one has to scroll through other recipes to be able to pin and track it down. In other words, planning concrete details about when to purchase or when to make and what is required is not a part of the interface template. In this way, Pinterest could even be said to encourage a form of hoarding of digital objects, encouraging users to be non-discriminatory between what is essential or unnecessary information—and so Pinterest becomes another renewal of the values of neoliberal capitalism where exchange, accumulation, and growth are valued above all else.

### Pinterest Layer 3: A Platform Technology's Relationship with Other Technologies

I've described already how the founder of Pinterest, Ben Silbermann, created Pinterest after quitting his job at Google right before the subprime mortgage crisis. I've also described that Pinterest has a particular domestic focus, in that users have a tendency to participate on Pinterest to engage with lifestyle posts. The visually-focused and inspiration content on Pinterest tends toward practical, light-hearted posts that imagine possibility in a positive light. In this third layer of analysis, I focus on the history of technological infrastructure of Pinterest, highlighting changes to the features not immediately visible or obvious to users; I will explore how the

tendency for Pinterest to emphasize (primarily women's) domestic labor aligns with values of austerity capitalism by providing corporations power and access to information at the expense of individual citizen decision-making.

More specifically, in this analysis of Layer 3, I trace how Pinterest started by having content determined by a community of human users placing value on digital domestic pin, and then I show how Pinterest has moved to have algorithms use surveillance technologies to curate purchasable content for users. This shift, as Amanda Friz-Siska and Robert Gehl describe in their conclusion to "Pinning the Feminine User," has been designed to be unnoticeable to the imagined Pinterest user, an imaged femininized subject not interested in details related to surveillance, data collection, or data analysis (22). The analytical work that attention to Layer 3 enables me to do is an effort to discover those hidden features and to explore their effects on users as they have transformed through Pinterest's history.

Throughout Pinterest's history, outside decisions and partnerships have played a large role in developing Pinterest's women-centered and domestic-centered user base. After the site was originally launched in 2010, it primarily spread via word of mouth to earn 3,000 users (Geron). Then the Pinterest user-base transformed suddenly after Silbermann shared a chance flight with home and design blogger Veronica Smith after the 2010 Alt Summit meeting. Together they developed the idea for the "Pin it forward" campaign, which focused on inviting popular lifestyle and mommy bloggers to create a blog post accompanied by a Pinterest pin board focused on what "home" meant to them (Smith).

## Pin It Forward: "*What Home Means To Us*"



Figure 31: "Pin It Forward" campaign logo by Veronica Smith. <<https://www.sfgirlbybay.com/2010/05/19/pin-it-forward-heres-the-schedule/>>

The Pin It Forward campaign—with its interest in defining *home* within the comforting realm of Pinterest's interface—set the tone for the future of the site and began defining how the platform would move to form relationships to corporations (see figure 32).

During these early years as Pinterest was seeking to grow its userbase, company leaders began organizing demonstrations and pop-up events at West Elm shops and a few small businesses in the San Francisco Area<sup>8</sup> (see figure 33).

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<sup>8</sup> Veronica Smith is also from the San Francisco area but moved to Los Angeles. The aesthetic emphasized on Pinterest became centered what was popular for interior design in these California cities.





Figure 32: Photograph from Business Insider showing Pinterest staff at a West Elm store. <[www.businessinsider.com/inside-pinterest-an-overnight-success-four-years-in-the-making-2012-4](http://www.businessinsider.com/inside-pinterest-an-overnight-success-four-years-in-the-making-2012-4)>.

Given these early collaborations with West Elm and the San Francisco home blogging community, it is not a surprise that the site's content tends to centralize on a particular home aesthetic (as described in Layer 1). It's important to note that those collaborations were focused on human-to-human connections: people can choose what home bloggers to follow or can make the decision to visit West Elm, or they can decide whether or not to create a Pinterest profile and what would be featured there. As the site moved forward from these developments, however, it depended far less on human-curated pinning (even those human-curated pins that were within the scope of a particular company's consumer base) and far more on the personalized pins based on surveillance of user activity. These decisions in the coding of Pinterest had effects on how users connected to content on the site: whereas in the early days, one's home feed was largely made up of the posts from the friends and bloggers one chose to follow, by 2013 Pinterest began tracking

users' web history to curate home feeds.<sup>9</sup> Instead of going to the site and seeing what friends, family, or favorite bloggers pinned, the posts you'd find on your home page became much less familiar. It also became difficult to decipher between a pin a friend shared and one that was promoted or catered to you based on Pinterest's surveillance of your search history.<sup>10</sup>

Several years later, the site underwent even more significant changes that put power in the hands of the market as opposed to on individuals making active choices to choose to follow particular people: for example, in March 2015 the home page algorithm was tweaked even further so that one's pins were based on search history or "picked for you pins" as opposed to the profiles one follows ("Picked for you Pins").<sup>11</sup> By May of that year, Pinterest opened the platforms to third party applications but tried to take a more measured approach than other platforms, allowing a limited number of applications access and requiring that users give explicit permission to do so (unlike Facebook, which has recently been under fire after millions of users' data was stolen through the use of third party apps) (Allen). Since 2015, Pinterest has revealed little information for users about how the third-party application feature has evolved, so it's difficult to tell what information is provided to third parties and how. What can be recovered is that Pinterest has continued to collaborate with West Elm: in 2017, West Elm designed an AI tool that invited users to share their home Pinterest boards and make recommendations for products based on one's individually created Pinterest board (see figure 34).

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<sup>9</sup> Pinterest *did* provide user's the option to "opt out" of this feature and sent out an email that detailed how to do this at least with the initial change.

<sup>10</sup> In 2018, Pinterest heard enough complaints from users about their algorithmically-arranged homepage, that they brought a "following" tab you can click on, which curates information based on who you are following and what they post in chronological order. In other words, the site allowed users to have the "old interface" option, but the default homepage is still the algorithmically curated one.

<sup>11</sup> The change to "picked for you pins" caused a stir in the home blogging community, as illustrated by bloggers responding by writing posts like "The Pinterest feed changes: How to see more of what you want to see. And why you'll never see all of it" (<https://coolmompicks.com/blog/2015/02/27/pinterest-feed-changes-how-to-see-what-you-want/>) and "How to remove promoted and picked for you pins on Pinterest" (<https://justvintagehome.com/how-to-remove-promoted-picked-for-you-pins/>).



**FIND YOUR INSPIRATION**  
Choose a Pinterest board that best represents your style.



**...AND BRING IT HOME!**  
We'll find west elm products that closely match your inspiration.

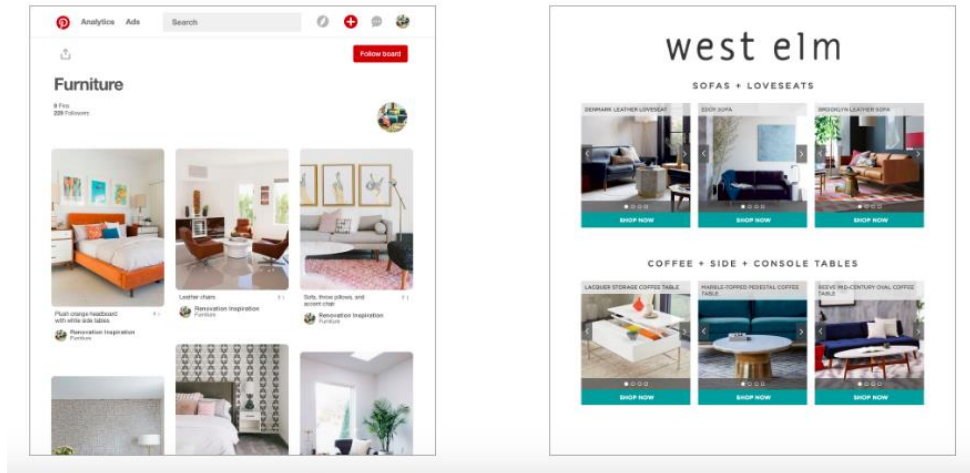


Figure 33: Screenshot of the top of West Elm Style Finder webpage. <[www.pinterest-style-finder.westelm.com](http://www.pinterest-style-finder.westelm.com)>.

In addition to the expansion of third-party collaborations and algorithmic-based arrangements, Pinterest continues to expand the site to allow it to trace a diverse range of user activity. For example, a direct message feature was added in 2014, so that users could not only send pins to one another but also private written messages (Southern). Whereas the Facebook platform used the creation of a messenger application as an alternative to texting or other messenger applications, Pinterest focused more on ensuring the messenger application helped users participate on Pinterest (rather than, for example, using it to decide what time to see a movie with friends). Although the messenger feature is convenient for users who want to talk to other friends who use Pinterest, on a developers end, it also becomes possible to surveille conversations between users about the items they pinned and why they pinned them.

Additionally, in 2018 Pinterest created a “skin tones” search feature in collaboration with the third-party beauty application “ModiFace.” This feature allows users to click a color-based search filter that caters Pinterest search results to users’ skin tone (of particular interest to those who use Pinterest for makeup inspiration). A post on the website Medium from Pinterest’s engineering account assured users that Pinterest respects their privacy by not storing the skin tone information in order to target users with advertisements or predict personal information such as ethnicity (Bhasin). However, given that this application is in its beta form and the site appears to be cautiously moving forward with more surveillance features, it is worthwhile to consider if this policy will change in the future and if users will be notified if it does.

The larger trend in all of these changes revolves around continually taking decision-making options away from individuals and putting it in the hands of corporate entities that use Pinterest and its technological infrastructure to shape users’ tastes. Users, of course, are *not* supposed to notice how this control transfer: Pinterest’s focus on domesticity means that any connotations of surveillance and data collection seem far removed from the site. In part, this is a strategic shaping through the relationship of Pinterest with outside websites and technologies: for instance, on news sites such as Today, a Pinterest “pin” button is not always immediately visible on a webpage. On pages that offer a recipe description they are (see figure 35).

# No-Bake Cheesecake

Alex Guarnaschelli | May 28, 2019 at 6:30 AM



Nathan Congleton / TODAY

print recipe

★★★★☆ (37 rated)

PREP TIME: 20 minutes    SERVINGS: 10-12

Who doesn't want a rich and creamy dessert in the warmer months? Don't worry, because this one is incredibly easy. Chilling cream cheese with the cookies and almonds allows it to firm up in this recipe, without the need for an oven. The combination of toasted almonds in the crust, the richness of the cream cheese filling and the raspberries always hits the spot.

Figure 34: Screenshot showing the button for pinning a recipe from an external site to Pinterest. Retrieved from <https://www.today.com/recipes/no-bake-cheesecake-recipe-t154950>.

However, for other content on the site, especially those without step-by-step instructions like recipes, Facebook and Twitter are featured as the primary social media buttons. Pinterest is either not offered as an option at all or offered only after clicking a drop-down menu (see figure 36).



Figure 35: Screenshot showing the social media buttons available for a political article external to Pinterest. Retrieved from <https://www.today.com/video/after-mueller-s-statement-more-democrats-push-for-impeachment-60554821617>.

These automated features, built into certain webpages but not others, are an example of how technological infrastructure encourages users to participate with Pinterest in particular ways that center the site's use on issues related to domesticity as opposed to more contentious topics.

In regard to social-political issues, Pinterest has had a tendency to take overriding actions over users. For example, in 2012, Pinterest eliminated pro-eating-disorder content from their website. In 2018, after it was found that the majority of shared pins on Pinterest about vaccinations cautioned people against them (despite medical guidelines demonstrating otherwise), Pinterest blocked "vaccinations" and terms related to vaccinations from the site. When users do search "vaccinations" they are provided an automated message that describes how vaccination content violates community guidelines (Farr), as figure 35 shows.

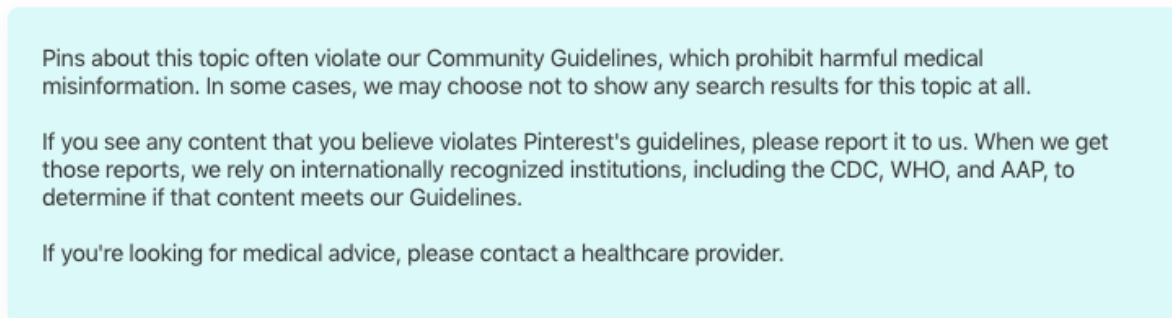


Figure 36: Screenshot from Pinterest after search "vaccinations". [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

Both these examples suggest how decisions outside of users' control are *baked* into the technological infrastructure to guide users to focus pinning on things they can purchase or create as oppose to something that may invite more controversial discussions or content that may caste Pinterest in a bad light.

This contradiction between Pinterest as more menacing corporate surveillance tool and as fun space for pinning cute domestic content echoes the values of austerity capitalism that ask

citizens to not worry, to attend to their homes and to look internally, as opposed to seeing the political dimensions that are a part of the post-Great Recession landscape. It's perhaps important to note another a popular variation of the "Keep calm and carry on" that began circulating on the internet in the years following the great recession (see figure 36):



Figure 37: "Keep Calm and Pin On" Meme by Ann Marie A. [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com). Posted 18 September 2011. <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/emerie/6160306023/in/photostream/>>

### The Three Layers Together

While it's common to critique social media platforms and say they are nothing but advertising or that they always want to sell something to someone, by attending to each of the three layers of TSR in light of the United States' post-recession economic context, we see a more complicated story: it's not just the aim for Pinterest to sell items to users, but that Pinterest users—and the data they produce while engaging with the site—become a form of capital in and of themselves. Or as Wendy Brown writes, "only ever *homo oeconomicus*."

Through considering Pinterest's Layer 1, we can see how identity formation on Pinterest centers so much on domestic-themed and lifestyle content that the site, upon first glance, appears neutral, even apolitical: "It's just living rooms and cheesecake recipes," one might think. Through analysis of the textual bodies and the forms of authorship on the site, however, it becomes more clear how Pinterest replicates certain features of an *austerity aesthetic*: there is a large emphasis on DIY focused projects, on upcycling or reusing past materials, and on crafting a space that feel homey, worn-in, and from another era. In addition, analysis of Layer 1 highlights the number of user-created cost-cutting pins that provide money saving advice. Such pins offer a form of domestic-instruction, teaching citizens how to "make do" in times of economic stress by educating themselves.

Through analyzing Layers 2 and 3, one can see the various ways that the site has been algorithmically arranged to feature business-promoting pins and support third-party corporate collaborations. Whereas once logging onto Pinterest allowed one to check in on a community shaped by a user for other users, especially those who were part of the DIY and home blogging community, the site has become co-curated by algorithms that selected content and advertisements based on one's search history. Instead of viewing the posts of friends, personal bloggers, and designers for creative or domestic inspiration, the site has transformed to provide corporations with further control and access to users' information. Users' surveilled data is valuable not (only) because of what they purchase, but because of what they aspire to do, create, and buy within the site's design. As user surveillance, and thus pin personification, expands, users are directed to "keep calm" and continue to focus on the individual responsibility highlighted in the visible features of Pinterest described in my analysis of Layer 1. The task at hand, according to the site's design and online infrastructure, is to focus on one's domestic tasks,



reflect on personal tastes, and generally aspire toward a better and more self-sufficient version of oneself.

A TSR analysis of all three layers shows how Pinterest both represents and reproduces the conflicting values of austerity capitalism, where one is told to conserve resources through cost-saving opportunities while simultaneously being told to aspire to consume in order to support the future of the economy. Furthermore, a TSR analysis reveals obstacles to ethical action underlying both the interface of Pinterest and the broader economic context within which it has been designed. For instance, while Pinterest invites a simple form of reflection, allowing users to independently scroll through a number of pins and decide which ones are useful and align with their needs and aesthetic tastes, there is no room for self-reflexivity, or rather, for taking a step back and critiquing the values and norms underlying why they have chosen to pin certain digital objects over others. In fact, Pinterest caters to the needs and imagined desires of the imagined individual user (white, middle-class, woman) to the extent that there are few opportunities for one to engage with perspectives outside of one's own—especially given that the algorithms of one's user feed now automate content based on personal online search history. Even given this personalization, however, the shape and design of the homes largely represented via Pinterest content comes from a homogenized aesthetic stemming from a collaboration between commercial big-box stores and the interior design popular in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The emphasis in Layers 1 and 2 on the private, on turning inward, and on attending to oneself conflicts with how responsibility is defined in social-relational ethics: users are invited to recraft themselves in terms of their own survival or self-improvement, but there is less of a sense that one is part of a shared community and that the decisions one individually or personally

makes has effects on others. This emphasis on autonomy and on serving private interests runs contrary to social-relational ethics since one becomes a responsible user on the site through participating on it in ways that emphasize this appearance of political neutrality: anyone—no matter their age, race, nationality, gender, or religious affiliation—can pin a room’s design, can aspire to make a particular recipe, and can pin a DIY project. From the Pinterest platform, everything one could want is within an imagined reach, at least digitally and within the realm of one’s one profile page. There is no need for transformation or change. One may just “keep calm and pin on.”

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined and then demonstrated what I call *a techno-social relationality* approach—or TSR—to analyzing social media. The two ending analyses demonstrate how the layered TSR approach to mediation helps us see new digital technologies ethical effects on techno-material and social relations. These relationships occur with ourselves and with others, with ourselves and our technologies, and, often invisibly, with our technologies and other technologies.

The TSR approach extends from the theoretical writing in previous chapters. In Chapter 1, I define what it means to be ethical from a feminist approach that acknowledges our mutual dependence on each other: as such, a social-relational perspective of ethics asks us to keep relationality with others in mind in all our actions. In Chapter 2, I argued for the need to expand our notion of relationality beyond the human in order to recognize the ethical effects of materiality. I hope that the layered approach and the analyses of this chapter demonstrate the value of the expanded rhetorical approach my dissertation offers. More specifically, I aim to have made the case in this chapter that rhetoricians should become rhetorically alert to the

features of texts over which we may not have control, such as those elements that take place at the level of interface and infrastructure within a social networking site.

In the next chapter, I offer pedagogical strategies for first-year writing instructors to help their students learn to apply a TSR approach to social media in their own reading and composing practices.

## Chapter Four: Techno-social Relationality in First-Year Composition Classes

### Introduction

Before developing a TSR approach, I struggled to find *multimodal* lessons, prompts, and activities for the writing classroom that centered on feminist theories of ethics. When ethics was addressed in multimodality, it might be briefly described in terms of teaching students how to properly cultivate ethos within academic texts; for example, a section on ethics might focus on what non-linguistic-based credibility looks like through design or how to create citations for texts that didn't solely depend on alphabetic writing (for example, see Selfe's *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*). Other times when ethics came up, it was in terms of intellectual property: for instance, a section on ethics focuses on helping students become more knowledgeable about the legality of copyright in terms of fair use, permissions, and creative commons (for example, see Ball and Arola's *Writer/Designer*). Or ethics is defined in terms of what it meant to be professional, limiting its scope to business-based or other forms of professional environments (for example, see Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality*).

Feminist ethics, on the other hand and as I showed in Chapter 1, considers what it means to be responsible for others more broadly from a subjective stance: it's less about defining right from wrong and more about the stance of openness required to create meaningful transformation within our shared and mutually-dependent social world. A social-relational definition of ethics in particular prioritizes how composing processes might be grounded by practices of self-reflexivity, humility, vulnerability, generosity, yielding, and patience, transparency, and responsibility. A TSR approach, by extension of social-relational ethics, attends to the role of techno-material—that is, to the material environments that are a part of twenty-first century digital technologies—in structuring the possibility to become ethical.

While in the last chapters I have defined and demonstrated a TSR approach, in this chapter I focus on how TSR can be brought to the composition classroom to impact the ethical orientations of students' multimodal analysis and composing. Moreover, this chapter is intended for teachers who—if they've been persuaded by the advantages of a TSR approach for multimodal analysis—might at this point be wondering how to make this happen in the classroom. In the following, then, I first describe activities that move students to consider what it means to be ethical and how material circumstances shape their possibility. Then I demonstrate how students can be introduced to each layer of techno-social relationality as a heuristic for analyzing social media text. I describe a number of activities and other prompts designed to help students become more aware of each layer of analysis found on social media platforms. While many activities focus specifically within social media environments, there are some designed to help students attend to ethics, design, and multimodal analysis more broadly, since such an understanding is especially important to analyzing the textual bodies of Layer 1.

After going through each layer, I offer examples of student prompts and activities that bring the different layers of TSR together.

### **Introducing Ethical and Techno-Material Awareness in the Composition Classroom**

Within the composition courses I've taught, I come to the first day of class with the realization that what I'm asking students to attend to is not something they may expect or have much practice with. For one, students, for the most part, aren't provided many formal educational experiences to analyze or compose multimodal texts. Two, students have even less familiarity with prioritizing how material conditions of their composing impacts ethics. And, three, students don't expect for social media to be taken as a serious and significant form of composing,

especially in a university writing course. These three surprises—especially when combined with the already existing challenges of students moving from high school to a discussion-based college composition course—mean that students are very likely coming in with very different expectations for what the work of the class entails. Therefore, the first weeks of class should involve helping student become initiated to these new expectations. This may be done through reflective writing assignments, direct discussions about classroom etiquette, and how student participation is assessed. Additionally, practicing a TSR approach in the classroom should first involve helping students become aware of social-relational ethics and then involve helping them bring in an awareness of how techno-material circumstances effect the circumstances for those ethics. In the following, I lay out how to complete this work through developing course procedures, assessment practices, and introducing students to key course terminology.

#### Bringing Social-Relational Ethics into the Composition Classroom

Since the conditions of social-relational ethics act as both as a means for analysis and a means to define the composing values in the class, it is best that students are introduced to social-relational ethics first or at least very early on. Importantly, if instructors intend to demonstrate that these conditions are to be valued, they must find ways to enact them themselves through instructor-to-student relations. One of the first means through which instructors define their relationships to students is with course documents, procedures, and initial class activities. These materials deserve an instructor's attention and should be designed to prioritize social-relational ethics to the extent possible given program-wide or university-wide procedures.

While I don't intend to dive deeply into scholarship on assessment practices, I want to emphasize that how we determine assessment within the scope of our students varied and complex lives is one of the first places we may make room for social-relational conditions, such

as generosity and patience, to thrive. The practices described in Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, which provide all students access to the highest grade no matter where they come from or how they speak or write, are in line with social-relational ethics since they acknowledge the limits of others and maintain charity toward what others do not know. Syllabus language also offers a meaningful opportunity to model the social-relational ethics that are to be prioritized throughout the rest of the course: For example, rather than punishing students for their late work, an instructor may use syllabus language that describes how students are welcome to meet during office hours to arrange alternative deadlines, within limits. And rather than failing a student who continually shows up late for class, a social-relationally-inspired policy would mean asking students (through the syllabus language or otherwise) to let an instructor know when and if events from outside of class may interfere or disrupt the work of the class. From that initial conversation, an instructor and student may determine together how to work around any problems in order for the student to keep up with the day-to-day course agenda (while also not disrupting the rest of the class).

It is also possible to practice social-relational ethics in the writing course through how *participation* is discussed, defined, and assessed within the classroom. For example, stressing the significance of participation within the writing class may show how practices of listening are to be valued while also helping students who come to the classroom expecting a lecture-based course (where a teacher does most of the talking and distribution of knowledge). Once students are aware of how much of the work of the class involves small and large group discussions and thoughtful responses to one another's writing, they may be invited to cultivate their own participation guidelines for the class through engaging in a series of reflective activities.

To begin such work, I've asked students to first reflect on their personal experiences for ethical communication more broadly: to consider the most important conversations in their lives and what conditions and relationships shaped those conversations. I typically will withhold providing students with any ready-made set of conditions of social-relationality, at least initially, preferring that they consider on their own what social practices and environments encourage ethical, meaningful, and transformative written or spoken exchanges. The following is a sample writing prompt I've used to encourage students to begin considering the guidelines for classroom-based discussion from the perspective of social-relational ethics:

Think back to a conversation you have had with another person or group of people that was very meaningful and important to you. It doesn't have to be an easy conversation or even one that was pleasant, but the conversation should be one where you and the people around you felt heard and respected: Who were you talking with? What choices did those you were with make in order to lead to a good discussion? How many people were you talking to? What happened when someone disagreed? How did people treat one another?

After students have a specific conversation in mind, I ask them to write about the material and environmental factors involved:

What was the environment you were in when you had the discussion? (Was it in a room, outside, in a car, over a text message?) Be sure to describe the environment in detail and try to emphasize your five senses, including sight, hearing, touch,



taste, smell. (For example, was it a bright classroom? Was it via phone conversation? Was it at home? Was it quiet? Was it over coffee or food?) Describe the physical and sensational factors that were present at the time of the conversation. Try to do the best if you are struggling to remember.

Once students have completed a reflection of a meaningful and ethical conversation they can remember, I ask them to think back to a time they have been involved with or witnessed a conversation that was unethical or where people were not responsible to one another, and I ask them then to complete the same round of questions. Through contrasting less ethical moments with the ethical, students deepen their sense of ethics in communication while also acknowledging the consequences of less than ethical conversations (as I share below).

After the reflections have been written (this could be done as an in-class writing prompt or as a homework assignment), I invite students to volunteer their responses. As students share their experiences, the ethical conversations inevitably end up echoing the conditions of social-relational ethics and the less ethical ones end up contrasting them. For instance, one student described how her family had to talk to their grandmother about how it wasn't safe for her to drive anymore and that it was time for her to give up her license. The student described how during that time everyone in the family treated one another with patience and took turns talking and listening. Another student described that he worked as a line cook and that often the most meaningful conversations occurred when workers stepped outside together after a busy shift: The fresh air and quiet street noises were a sharp contrast to the sound of chopping, frying, and shouting that was going on inside. And those quieter moments became opportunities for the workers to connect and have more meaningful conversations. Another student shared that he

struggled talking to his father when he was deciding what to do after high school: he said it “felt like talking to a brick wall.” When instances like this happen, I may step in to suggest some of the social-relational terms: “Is what you are saying is that he lacked humility? Or did he struggle to yield to what you were saying in order to really understand where you were coming from?”

Students also describe the more ethical conversations as ones that often occurred in environments of comfort or were quiet in some way: people were sitting around a dimly lit kitchen table, drinking tea, or sitting around a campfire. Usually the more meaningful conversation didn’t happen online, but—when they did—it was through a direct message. The unethical conversations, on the other hand, often occurred through social media responses, or in someone else’s home or at a time when the environment was uncomfortable, such as a too-hot summer day.

After they share such experiences, I’ll share the conditions of social-relational ethics in class and relate them to their previous discussions. Usually this takes the form of a handout. When the conditions are written out in front of students, I invite them to use the language of the conditions to dig deeper into why those unethical moments were unethical by asking how they compare to the conditions: for example, the student who had the issue with his father might note that his father is pretty set in his ways and isn’t very self-reflexive about why he does the things he does and that, especially in conversations with the student, the father too often moves into an authoritative role without being open to the vulnerability necessary to understand experiences from another perspective. These in-class conversations, of course, are not meant to turn into therapy sessions (although it is likely students may share some personal moments), so it’s important that these conversations always be brought back to the composing goals for the class. By using the conditions of social-relational ethics to better understand what was working or not

working in past communicative experiences, students begin to see how important it is in their communication to listen, to be flexible with one's ideas, and to be willing to listen to new perspectives—all values of the course as well. Students also begin to reflect on how environmental circumstances (“the day we got in the biggest fight was the hottest day of the year”) impact the ability to meet ethical conditions.

To give students the opportunity to further engage with the conditions of social-relationality, their reflections may be extended to the development of student-led participation guidelines. The questions below offer a starting point for this work.

What types of class conversation have been most productive and interesting for you as a learner? (Think back to your own personal experiences.)

What environments make you feel comfortable and respected? How may we help to create these environments in our class?

In your experience, what are some ways to handle disagreement or controversial topics during discussion?

What are some ways to help “revive” a discussion that becomes slow or boring?

What advice do you have for handling shyness or “stage fright” during class discussion?

I also ask students what kind of classroom environment will best help them learn, given that confines of the classroom. At this time, student can make decisions about how to arrange the

course desks, whether to play music and what music to have playing in the background at the start of class or during group work, whether or not to have snack sharing days, what ways to position their technological devices, and even what setting the lighting should have. All of these environmental factors can change too: for example, if it is primarily a writing craft day where students are using the time to compose on their computers, they may suggest using headphones to listen to personal music, whereas doing this during discussion would come off as snubbing their classmates

In this way, the social-relational conditions act as guiding values, but students are provided the time and space for imagining how they should take form within the class.<sup>12</sup>

#### Introducing Techno-Material Awareness in the Composition Classroom

Once social-relational conditions are prioritized in the class and students have begun to think about how their material environments relate to their communicative actions, conversations and discussions about social media as a composing technology can be brought into the class. It is possible initially that, when social media is discussed as a course issue, students come to it with more deterministic views: in my experience, students will identify social media as a problem or always bad, especially when social media are discussed within the context of an academic writing course. On the other hand, students may view social media and conversations about it as a part of their personal composing life as opposed to a tool that can be discussed and used within an academic context. It is important, then, that social media be introduced as both a *tool* and as a *text* within the classroom. Students will benefit from understanding that social media is something that is folded into their conversations, discussions, readings, research, and writing

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<sup>12</sup> I will usually use students' discussion guidelines as a means to assess the participation percentage in course assessment.

processes as opposed to being treated something that is always bad or tacked on as an extra assignment, activity, or discussion.

It is helpful to let students know that social media technologies are going to be a part of the class and that there will be a certain level of technical knowledge required in order to read such texts. Therefore, I have found it helpful to take the time to become more knowledgeable of students' technological access and experiences by asking that students fill out a private survey on the first day of class. The below bullet points come from an example of such a survey, which I used in Fall 2017 for a first-year composition course that did not have access to university computers in the classroom:

Name you use:

Pronouns you use: (he/she/they/etc.)

Major/minor you are pursuing (or considering):

What social media do you use and/or are familiar with? (Instagram, Snapchat, Pokémon Go, Youtube, Myfitness Pal, Twitter, etc.)

Do you own a smartphone? If so, how comfortable are you using it? Do you bring it with you to class regularly?

Do you own a portable computer with a keyboard (an iPad or laptop, for example)? If so, how comfortable are you using it? Are you able to bring it to class regularly?

Please describe your access to technology (Laptop? Home computer? iPad? Access to Internet? Etc.)

Anything else you would like your instructor to know about you at the start of class?

I don't spend time discussing students' access to technology in the classroom, but it is helpful (and an ethical pedagogical practice) to know if there are students who have less technological experience or have chosen to not use social media regularly or at all. If there are students in the classroom who have less experience with social media platforms, it may be helpful to expand later assignments and discussions about TSR to include conversations about other forms of online composing (such as online articles or forums that don't require a password or username to read).

Early on, or within the first few class days, I include a introduce a brief, low-stakes online reading that sets the tone for how social media will be addressed within the classroom. A tweet thread or other social media post works extra well in this instance since the content and the medium both serve the purpose of introducing how the composing we do in the classroom and social media are connected. For example, I have frequently used a tweet thread shared by techno-culture journalist Xenia Jardin, who discusses the significance of extending empathy to our online worlds<sup>13</sup> (see figure 39). I find Jardin's tweet thread especially useful since it introduces the themes I hope students will develop new knowledges about through our course

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<sup>13</sup> Jardin's tweet thread refers to Pax Dickinson, the chief technology officer of *Business Insider* who was fired in 2014 for his sexist and racist tweets. I typically mention this to student but do not provide additional readings or context since the point of the tweet is to direct their attention to social media and ethics.

work—in particular, knowledges about what it may mean to be responsible and ethical and how our online world has repercussions we don't always think of.

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

Here's what I think about Pax and other ugly things that happened online recently involving other mean dumb people doing bad things.

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

The Internet is a powerful, magical tool to make awesome things with, and it allows us to experience and create cool things.

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

It's also an enabler of justice and global empathy, of goodness. Why would you use that platform to make other human beings suffer?

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

I think if you think the Internet is a place where it's ok to be cruel to other humans, that's just so sad. You must really be suffering.

[Reply](#) [Retweeted](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

I think we have a responsibility to be good to one another. That's part of the deal of getting life. Our responsibility is here online, too.

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

 **Xeni Jardin**  Following

We must engineer a culture of empathy online. Or, future platforms that enable this more naturally. Find the ghost in the machine.

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)

Figure 38: Xeni Jardin Tweet. Twitter.com. Retrieved 2014.



After reading the tweet thread in class, I invite students to, in groups, consider how they have defined writing in the past and what it means to write responsibly in a social media world by posing questions such as:

What does “writing” mean to you? Is it just words on paper?

Is creating a Podcast or Youtube video a form of writing? Does social media count as writing? Why?

What purpose does writing serve for you?

What does “writing responsibly” mean to you and how do you ensure you write responsibly?

What possibilities are there for writing responsibly online? How is it different than face-to-face?

These discussions and activities create the foundation for bringing a TSR approach into the writing class by modeling how such ethics may be practiced in the classroom community. Teachers may continue to model TSR approaches by ensuring pedagogical practices are inclusive: this means prioritizing efforts to continue learning how pedagogical practices may be designed to be more inclusive, especially for students who face discrimination based on socio-economic status, race, sexual orientation, disability, or religion.

## Folding the Three-Layers of TSR in the Composition Classroom

Once students understand that the composing of the class prioritizes ethics and they recognize that social media composing will be taken seriously within the course, students can be offered an assignment that introduces them to the three layers of TSR. The following assignment functions as a form of ice-breaker for the early weeks of class since it provides an opportunity for students to share a bit about themselves while also introducing them to the three layers of a TSR analysis.

Our class will analyze social media and other online multimodal text through a 3-layered form of analysis called techno-social relationality (TSR). Throughout the semester we will move through each of these individual layers, spending time to learn how to analyze each. For your assignment, we will just focus on becoming acquainted with the different layers through a brief analysis.

### **Layer 1: A Composer's Relationship to Other People through a Text**

The content of posts that appear in a user's feed and is shared within a user's feed: it's the memes, images, article, written messages, responses, shares, etc.

You can identify this layer through the terms *authorship*, or who participates as an author of the text, and *textual bodies*, or what different texts make up a social media post. Authorship focuses on questions of *who* and textual bodies focus on questions of *what*.

**Authorship:** Who or what authored the content? Is the content entirely a user's own composing or from a group or organization? Is the user sharing another's

content? If so, whose content is it and where is it from? Is the user responding or interacting with another's shared content? Is the user revising or remixing the content in some way? Is the user adding additional comments or to a post? Who or what are the actors participate in the sharing and publishing of content?

**Textual bodies:** What are the different texts in play given specific social media contexts? What textual bodies appear to be the primary (that is, the more the more immediate, visible, or dominant) text? What textual bodies appear to be secondary or more minor? What textual bodies are immediately connected to the primary text through links, responses to the text, shared ownership, or different forms of co-authoring? What other texts is a viewer likely to encounter on the way to getting to the primary one(s)?

### **Layer 2: A Composer' Relationship With the Platform Interface**

This layer emphasizes the relations users have with a social media's user interface based on its design: it involves identifying the static elements and features of the platform that make up its template (or in some instances, how that template interacts with the environment outside of social media, such as when a notification makes a particular noise). Social media leaders and computer programmers are the ones who design this part of the social media platform.

### **Layer 3: A Platform Technology's Relationship with Other Technologies**

This layer is composed of the hidden and at times invisible ways our technology interacts/connects to/and composes with other technologies. It can be identified through the circulation, automation, and surveillance on the site.

We will move into more detail about Layer 3 in the semester since it is the most difficult to track, but for now, let's just focus on analyzing **circulation** since it is easier to identify than automation and surveillance. You can identify how a text circulates through the following:

*Backtrack content on a platform:* Backtracking content means going outside of the original post (as it came into one's social media feed) in order to trace its sharing history within and outside of the platform

*Consider content in relation to social media currencies:* Every social media platform has its own method for determining the "value" of a particular post, profile, group, image, etc. Considering social media currencies means asking and reflecting on how content is viewed as valuable and thus available for circulation on the platform (for example, through what a user *likes* or *follows*).

*Examine content in relation to current trending or popular content on the platform:* What trending issues or stories can be related to why a post showed up at this particular time in your feed? How does the content relate to other content that is trending online?

## **Writing Assignment: Identifying the Three-Layers of Social Media**

Please compose two paragraphs in response to each of the three layers using the questions below. Please bring your document to our next class period.

*Layer 1:* First, find a social media post that you identify with in some way and that caught your attention: the post could be a meme, GIF, news article, video, image, or Tweet, etc. Who are the authors that are part of this post? Is it just one textual body or are there multiple textual bodies? Describe this post in as much detail as possible and include screenshots if possible.

*Layer 2:* Name the social platform on which you found the post. Then name 3-4 main design features of the platform. For example, what are the primary colors? What are the main elements of the site? (Or in other words, what are your eyes first drawn to when you see the screen?) What are the features of the site that act as a template, that are standardized for all users and over which you don't have control? Include a screenshot (or screenshots) of the platform in your assignment document if possible.

*Layer 3:* Research your post a bit to find out how it circulated: what current or trending issues is this post addressing? How popular is it on social media and who or what appears to be circulating it? What is the currency involved in the platform

you are using (likes, follows, etc.)? How do you think the social media currency influenced your exposure to the post?

Once students have an introduction to the Layers overall, the class content can move to focus on each of the layers individually.

#### TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 1

Layer 1 of a TSR approach attends to the *authorship* and *textual bodies* of content or posts that appear in a user’s feed and that are shared within the feed. To analyze this layer, students benefit from a general introduction to multimodal rhetorical analysis.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on key rhetorical terms (audience, context, purpose, logo, ethos, and pathos) as well as on identifying the different modes (linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial) offers a starting point for the basic language of Layer 1’s analysis. Having these terms on hand is especially important given the large variety of texts that might make up an analysis of Layer 1. For example, depending on the social media platform with which they are working, students may be analyzing a collection of images, a song, series of short videos, a reply to a post authored by another author, a news article or story, etc.

As students use multimodal rhetorical analysis to analyze the forms of authorship and textual bodies that are a part of Layer 1, ethics should be a continued part of the discussion.

Showing students examples of texts that are less ethical or problematic—in that the text doesn’t

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<sup>14</sup> The following readings may work well to introduce students to multimodal rhetorical analysis:

- (1) Arola, Kristin, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl Ball. *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects*. Boston: Bedford, 2014. [Chapters 1 and 2]
- (2) Wysocki, Anne. “The Multiple Media of Texts: How Onscreen and Paper Texts incorporate Words, Images, and Other Media.” *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analysis of Text and Textual Practices*. Ed. Bazerman, Charles, and Prior, Paul.

invite critical and responsible interaction—can help students become aware of how they may avoid making choices that are less ethical themselves (as I describe in the examples below.)

Often times when students are first introduced to this first layer and are asked to describe a less ethical text, they often use the term “biased” to describe a text but don’t go into deeper descriptions about what the bias is or why being biased is problematic. And while the descriptor “biased” may have been helpful in past educational experiences that have introduced students to the conventions of academic writing, it also has its shortcomings: For instance, when students describe a text as biased, within my experience in the classroom, they often mean that a text invokes emotions or uses a first-person perspective. Social-relational ethics doesn’t position emotional responses in composing as bad as much as it prioritizes the development of emotional awareness through self-reflexivity. So rather than using the language of bias, I’ve guided students to consider communication that is not invested in social-relational ethics in terms of harassment, *advertising*, and *propaganda*. I offer these terms in particular because they cover all the ways communicative work may work in opposition to ethical communicative practices described by social relational ethics.

More specifically, rather than describing a text simply as “biased,” these terms enable students to understand when personal biases may prevent ethical action. I offer a brief definition of each:

- *Harassment* is any action that threatens, humiliates, or demeans another person.
- *Advertising* is any action that involves selling an object or service over any other goal (such as ethical relations with others).
- *Propaganda*, to use Thomas Huckin’s definition from “Propaganda Defined,” is “false or misleading information or ideas addressed to a mass audience by parties

who thereby gain advantage” and “is created and disseminated systemically and does not invite critical analysis or response” (126).

Once students have terminology to contrast ethical communication (and the experiences and knowledges that make it up) with less ethical composing, they can begin to analyze particular textual bodies using multimodal rhetorical analysis to consider whether or not the authoring is an ethical, unethical, or has elements of both. For example, students may examine different Youtube videos or Instagram photos of fashion or beauty influencers to discuss the degree to which the videos offer honest reviews of items and to discuss what is promoted content the influencer was paid to sell. Students can also examine Twitter responses to popular advertisements (for example, Superbowl commercials), analyzing both the advertisement and the Tweet as a textual body as part of Layer 1. Memes or other posts involving obvious political, racial, or gender bias may also be analyzed, along with the different responses to them<sup>15</sup>. The following prompt may be used with any combination of these examples.

### **Analyzing Texts Through Layer 1**

We will be using two terms—in addition to the terms for multimodal rhetorical analysis (audience, context, purpose, logos, pathos, ethos, and the five modes)—to analyze the features of online text.

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<sup>15</sup> If bringing in different forms of harassment in the classroom, I advise providing students with a content warning beforehand and an opportunity for a different assignment, if possible. See for example Kendell Gerdes’s *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* article “Trauma, Trigger Warnings, and the Rhetoric of Sensitivity.”



**Authorship** involves attending to those who make choices to publish or otherwise interact with content in a feed, whether that content is one's own original words, a simpler sharing of another's content, or a sharing of another's content with a response: Who or what authored the content? Is the content entirely a user's own composing or does it come from a group or organization? Is the user sharing another's content (if so, whose and where is it from)? Is the user responding or interacting with another's shared content? Is the user revising or remixing the content in some way? Is the user adding additional comments or to a post? Who or what are the actors participate in the sharing and publishing of content?

**Textual bodies** involve attending to the multiple texts or a series of texts on social media that may not always be discrete: What textual bodies appear to be the primary (as in more the more immediate, visible, or dominant text)? What texts appear to be secondary or more minor? What texts are immediately connected to the text, through links, responses to the text, shared ownership, or different forms of co-authoring? What other texts is a viewer likely to encounter on the way to getting to this text?

Please consider the following questions to connect the post's *authorship* and *textual bodies* to the ethical conditions and less ethical forms of communication we discussed last week in class: How do the forms of authorship meet or diverge from how we are defining what it means to be ethical or unethical in composing?

*Ethical Communication...*

- 1 Critiques the norms into which we are born (self-reflexivity);
- 2 Acknowledges the limitations of discourse, or the limitations we have in communicating through existing social and linguistic conventions (humility);
- 3 Cultivates a self-acceptance about the limits of our knowing (vulnerability);
- 4 Acknowledges the limits of others (generosity);
- 5 Preserves a certain passivity in social exchange that allows for listening, especially in times of difference (yielding);
- 6 Maintains charity toward what we do not know and for what others do not know (patience);
- 7 Strives intentionally toward honesty and truth—while recognizing our own fallibility (transparency);
- 8 Recrafts ourselves with and for one another as opposed to through violence, force, or trickery (responsibility)

*Unethical Communication is...*

- 1 Any action that threatens, humiliates, or demeans another person  
(Harassment)
- 2 Any action that involves the greater goal of selling an object or service  
(Advertising)
- 3 Any “false or misleading information or ideas addressed to a mass audience by parties who thereby gain advantage” and “is created and disseminated systemically and does not invite critical analysis or response” (Propaganda)  
  
\*from Thomas Huskin’s “Propaganda Defined” in *Propaganda and Rhetoric in Democracy*

As students discuss their findings from this activity, they often discover the tendencies of less ethical composing: for example, they discover that less ethical communicators often establish authority through using aggressive language, treating those that disagree as the target of a joke or positioning certain identities as unworthy of care. Students also often discover that there is also typically a lack of transparency on the part of the authoring individual,, who strives toward more ego-driven forms of argumentation that defend the self or the self’s identity through selectively sharing information (as oppose to communication that strives toward truth given the full scope of information available).

Once there is a general understanding of what unethical communication can look like, I spend more time with *propaganda* as a term since—while harassment and advertising may be more easy to identify and avoid in student’s own composing processes—students tend to have less experience with how to identify propaganda and how to avoid propaganda’s tendencies (such as how it generalizes or encourages a “with us or against us” form of thinking about

argumentation). To begin this work, students can be invited to expand on Huckin’s brief definition of “propaganda” in their own words: for examples, students can define propaganda as untruthful, manipulative, not based on truth, commanding, or authoritative. After identifying the traits of propaganda, they can move to contrasting it with ethical composing practices through a specific textual analysis.

One genre that I’ve found particularly useful for discussions on propaganda versus social-relational ethics is anti-drug public service announcements (PSA). PSAs work well since students do not need extensive historical or contextual knowledge to complete an analysis. For instance, the 1980s video “This Is Your Brain... This Is Your Brain On Drugs” by the Partnership for a Drug Free America features a white, suburban father figure talking to the audience as though the audience were a child being disciplined. The guiding metaphor of the video is that a raw, unbroken egg is a brain, and an egg cracked and put on a frying pan is a brain on drugs.



*Figure 39: Screenshot from “This is your brain on drugs” PSA video.*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOENVylxPI>

After playing the video I first ask students questions focused on describing the video (that is, questions tied the Layer 1 of the video):

How would you describe the person who is speaking? When would you use that tone of voice? What actions or objects stand out in this video, why? (For instance, the egg metaphor.) What kind of emotional responses do you have to this as an audience? (There is no right answer here.) What in the video encourages you to respond this way? Does anything else stand out to you? Of what do you think the PSA is trying to persuade you?

Once students have time to consider the video itself, I'll play it again, this time guiding them to analyze the video in terms of authorship and ethics (still within a Layer 1 analysis):

How is the person who speaks treating the audience viewing this ad? On what actions or behaviors does the speaker rely to create credibility? Why? From your perspective, does this sound like an author/speaker who is "ethical"? What would it look like if the author/speaker spoke in a more ethical way?

Most students agree that the actor, the only human we see in the video, is too authoritative and treats the viewer as though they are deserving of discipline; the actor extends neither patience nor generosity to a listener. Students are also quick to point out the ethical shortcomings in terms of transparency: the video, for example, does not define what it means by the term "drugs" nor does it make a point to honestly represent the effects of any particular drug.

The same process can be used to analyze another textual body of the same genre. In my experiences, I've found inviting students to compare and contrast different textual bodies with different forms of authorship has often created more thoughtful analytical responses. For

example, a 2016 video by the Truth campaign “Smoking Gap” offers a more updated version of an anti-drug PSA that, at least initially, appears more ethical than the 1980s video. The Truth PSA focuses on a particular form of addiction, smoking, and also presents evidence from scholarly study. Students also often describe how the upbeat and noisy video seems to be more respectful in terms of how it is communicating with an audience: there is no commanding, authoritative voice from a single speaking person. Instead, there are a number of different textual sources in the video: a news reporter, a series of black and white cartoons, a video of a monkey, and, most importantly, a screen showing a quotation from a news article (see figures 41 and 42).

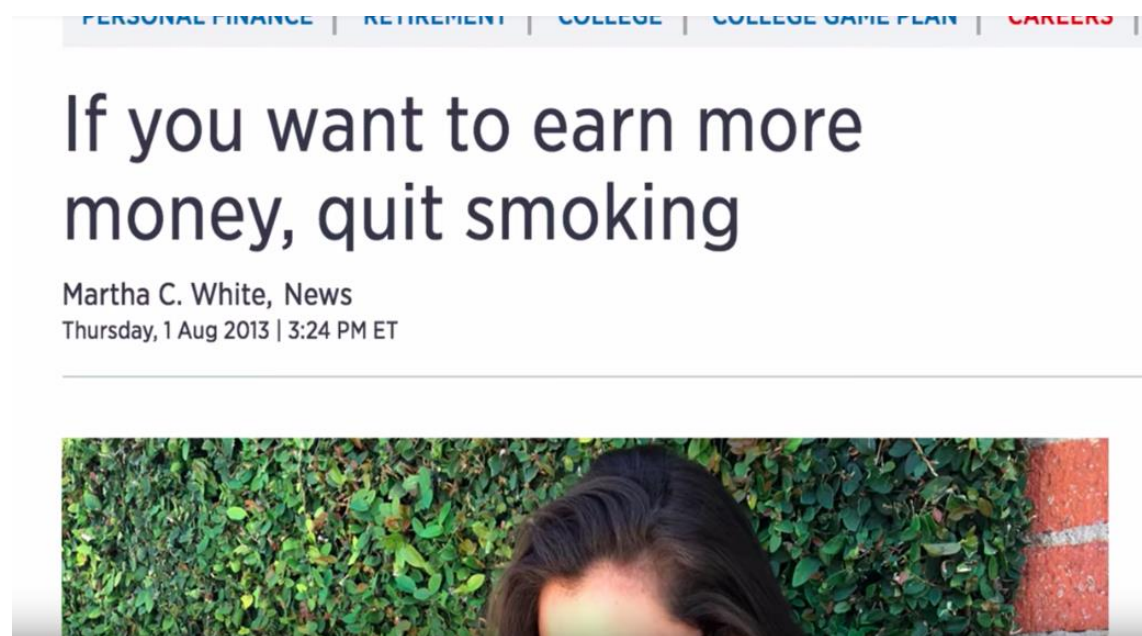


Figure 40: Cropped Screenshot from the "Smoking Gap" Truth PSA.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_182kIOPRvo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_182kIOPRvo)



Figure 41: Cropped Screenshot from the "Smoking Gap" Truth PSA.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_182kIOPRvo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_182kIOPRvo)

In order to emphasize attention to ethics in this analysis, I encourage students to discuss how the Truth PSA varies from the first video in terms both of how it treats its audience and how it presents information as a series of different scenes that are part of discrete textual bodies. This collection of media varies from the "This is your Brain" PSA, which just includes a single scene and speaker.

At first, many students believe that the Truth PSA is more ethical since it is more transparent and more generous with its audience and does not depend on scare tactics to be convincing. But then I encourage them to dig deeper into the information presented, in particular to consider the news story by "Martha C White" cited in the PSA (figure 41). I'll ask a volunteer in class to use their phone or a computer to search for the original news story the Truth PSA cites. Students usually find it quickly and can see that the original news story is actually citing a 2013 scholarly article authored by Julie Hotchkiss and Melinda Pitts ("Even One is Too Much: The Economic Consequences of Being a Smoker"). From this information, students can eventually find and read the article on Google Scholar or through the library database. Once students read the abstract of the article, they can determine that the Truth PSA is misleading:

according to the study, smokers don't automatically earn less; rather there is a mix of social-economic factors in play that determine whether one is more likely to smoke or not. In other words, the Truth video mixes correlation with causation. After viewing both videos, the class may compare and contrast these videos with their expanded definition of propaganda and, if time, be invited to brainstorm or create a more ethical anti-smoking PSA.

I prefer working with these videos in the classroom because they are similar to the features of the virally-shared content on social media that makes up Layer 1: they are brief and use several different modes, and, in the case of the Truth PSA, involve an assemblage of different textual materials, ranging from cartoons to a scripted news report. Even if students are not creating video assignments in class, they can consider how becoming more aware of the features of propaganda in videos can help them become more aware of the choices and mannerisms they want to avoid in their own composing processes, if they wish to develop ethical relations with their audience. In addition to using a PSA, this activity may be replicated with other genres of texts, such as a short opinion piece or a series of memes.

After students become accustomed to using the categories of harassment, advertising, and propaganda to analyze how multimodal content can be more or less ethical, and after students have related these discussions to their own composing processes, I've found it productive to spend time with an example of a text that participates in more ethical ways.<sup>16</sup> The same prompt I presented above, "Analyzing Texts Through Layer 1," can be used as a starting point for examples of videos that are more ethical in their content.

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<sup>16</sup> Two short videos that are particularly effective in terms of meeting the conditions of social relational ethics is "Present Tense," a short film created by teens in Zanzibar ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M\\_bPt85MNo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M_bPt85MNo)), and "Can You Read My Lips," a video about lip-reading based on the essay "Seeing at the Speed of Sound" by Rachel Kolb (<https://vimeo.com/148127830>).



Introducing students to the first layer of analysis, at least within the scope of a first-year composition classroom setting, involves introducing students to the terminology of rhetorical multimodal analysis (audience, context, purpose, logos, ethos, pathos, and the visual, linguistic, spatial, aural, and gestural modes); to the terminology of ethics (self-reflexivity, humility, vulnerability, generosity, yielding, patience, transparency, and responsibility); and to the terminology that helps them analyze non-ethical communication (harassment, adverting, propaganda). By becoming familiar with these terms, students should be able to better analyze multimodal texts in terms of ethics: most specifically, they will be prepared to analyze the type of digital textual assemblages that are so often a part of social media composing.

#### TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 2

Layer 2 emphasizes an analysis of interfaces based on their design and how that design relates to the texts identified through the questions asked for Layer 1. Importantly, as students develop an awareness of Layer 2, they become more emotionally aware of the design of our social media environments and its impact on users' tendencies to read, react, and respond to text. To bring Layer 2 into a first-year composition classroom means to invite students to analyze the more standardized features of a website or application, the features that often go unnoticed or are considered just a neutral background to the content published on a website or social media platform. In an online setting, those who author content for a social media are usually not in full control over the site's design. However, we don't often encourage students to attend to how that background content (that is, the template-based design features) influences we read or otherwise engage with social media. For example, students might have been asked in other classes to view a video on Youtube (as in doing Layer 1 analysis) but would not have been asked to consider how the interface of Youtube participates in the meaning and processing of that video by its

viewers (Layer 2). It is important then to take time in class to analyze those aural, textual, spatial, and gestural features that a particular author doesn't always have control over and then to analyze how those features impact possibilities for ethical accountability.

One way to help students see these differences is to compare a webpage where an author or authors have had more control over the design features of a website compared to one that has been designed to be more standardized. When students analyze webpage where Layer 1 and 2 are merged—as when the authoring of the larger design features of the website site and the content are the same—and then analyze a templated web page that has been standardized (such as a WordPress website based on a webpage or a social media platform), they will be able to bring more awareness to the constraints under which those authoring in Layer 1 work.

In the below example, I describe comparing a website—“I Heart the Singular They,”—where the creator of the content was the same as the creator of the site's design, with a standardized webpage from *Grammar Girl*, which comes from the MacMillan Podcast organization. The rhetorical choices made on “I Heart Singular They” are completely in control of the website's author (since the author of the webpage and the content are the same); the site does not conform to or rely on any template. On the other hand, the *Grammar Girl* webpage, like most web content presently, is part of a larger corporate enterprise, and therefore must conform to the standardized features of the *Quick and Dirty Tips* website (see figure 43 and 44).

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## Gender-Neutral Pronouns: Singular 'They'

By Mignon Fogarty, [Grammar Girl](#)

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More Tips from Grammar Girl

It was only about a year and a half ago that I did a show about [using \*they\* as a singular pronoun](#), but I told you this was an active area of language change, and there's been enough new change that you need an update.

When we're talking about the singular *they*, we're usually talking about using *they* in sentences like these:

- Tell the next caller *they* won a car.
- Every student should thank *their* teacher.

Figure 42: Screen shot of Grammar Girl webpage. <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/gender-neutral-pronouns-singular-they>

The singular "they" is...

"They" doesn't assume a person's gender,<sup>1</sup> and it doesn't assume there are only two.<sup>2</sup> It's inclusive of people of all different genders (including me, everyone else, and you). It's a metaphorical blanket that can cover the human population (which, non-metaphorically, would be a cuddle celebration).

The singular "they" is...

Figure 43: Screenshot of the "I Heart the Singular They" website. <https://iheartsingularthey.com/>

To begin helping students become more aware of the features of Layer 2 and how important those features are to modern webpages, including social media sites, I lead students through a three-step analysis that asks them to spend less time on the linguistic and textual features of the site and more on the website's design and how it invites others to participate.<sup>17</sup>

1. **List and describe:** *What do you notice about the text's design and arrangement?* List all the design elements you see on the text and try to be as specific as possible. For example, instead of saying the text uses "color," describe the color with as many details as you can: What color(s)? Where is the color located? How noticeable is it? [Hint: Imagine you are trying to describe the text to someone over the phone.] Design elements can include layout, color, perspective, size, movement, shape, style, sound, volume, silence, tone of voice, use of white space, arrangement, body gestures, facial expressions, borders, framing, font choice, tone, brightness, contrast, background, and foreground.
2. **Associate**<sup>18</sup>: *What kind of attitudes, emotions, and/or values do we associate with the design elements you've listed?* Attitudes and emotions involve how people feel or their disposition toward things. Values involve

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<sup>17</sup> This activity works especially well if the website is projected at the front of the room, so the linguistic features are more difficult to read but the design is still visible.

<sup>18</sup> It is useful for students to have an example of how to associate emotional relations with design. I've often included the following example in a prompt: "A bright image of an apple may signify education since it's often considered a teacher's gift. From this, we may relate emotions of child-like awe or curiosity and openness to new knowledge. We may also associate memories like the feeling of sitting in a school desk or how we felt toward a teacher who was particularly kind or influential. On the other hand, if we saw an apple in a dark background or on the ground with a bite taken out of it, it could signify temptation and/or trickery. We may connect it with emotions of feeling threatened, out of control, or 'giving in' when we know we shouldn't."

what people care about or feel are important socially, culturally, and politically. Try to write down a bit of each for your design choices.

- 3. Rhetorical relationships:** *Based on your answers to (1) and (2), what kind of relationship is the overall design of the text creating with its readers and how?* It may be helpful to start off with adjectives (professional, friendly), but once you have a general description, try to go into even more detail and refer to specific elements of the text to support your adjectives.

A follow-up activity after this three-step process could be inviting students to consider what kinds of decisions are made for them by a social media website (Layer 1) versus what design options they have control over as authors of textual bodies (Layer 2). For example, on Twitter, students may point out how users have control over the phrasing of their tweets, the name of their handle, their profile and a background image, and a short biography. Users are also given some color control options, but these are minimal. On the other hand, they cannot control the size of their profile image on the screen, the number of words they can tweet in a single post, how long their biography is, or the order of their headers (the home, moments, notifications, and messages all come in a standardized order for all users). Once a list of the features that are outside a user's control are made, these features can be brought into conversation about a particular textual body or series of textual bodies (as described in Layer 1) in order to have broader context to analyze ethics. The following questions may help to bring further awareness both to the features of Layer 2 and its relationship to meeting the conditions of social-relational ethics.

What emotions surface as you move through your platform? At what speed do your eyes move over the text—and why? What about your mind?

How do you feel about the pace of reading/viewing content on this platform?

How do your feelings change (if they do) before versus after you engage the platform? In what ways does the technology express emotion or act as emotive?

What adjective(s) would you use to describe the platform's demeanor? How does the platform's demeanor compare to your own as you use it?

What kind of choices do you make on a platform and how do you connect that to your mood?

Are you able to uphold the ethical conditions we discussed in class on the platform? If not, what about the technology's design seems to be obscuring your ability to meet these conditions?

How do you think the platform influences others' emotions—especially those with different technical literacies, experiences, and/or backgrounds? What encourages you to make such assertions about others in their social media spaces?

Do you feel safe on this platform? Do you believe others feel safe?

What about the technology makes you want to stay on social media? What about the technology makes you want to turn it off?

Following these activities and discussions, students may be asked to reimagine and redesign the website to in order to better work with the conditions of social-relationality. This works well as a group activity:

- (1) Split students into small groups and provide each group with a different social media site
- (2) Ask them to identify the different features of the site and what kind of relationships they are encouraging
- (3) Provide students with the conditions of social-relational ethics and ask to redesign the site (using sheets of paper, crayons, markers, and construction paper) in order to better meet those conditions.

By learning about Layer 2, students can become more aware of the ethical effects of the design features of a website over which corporate entities and professional programmers have control but everyday users don't.

### TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Layer 3

The final layer, Layer 3, involves the hidden and at times invisible ways our technology interacts/connects to/and composes with other technologies—or what I have described as *machine agency* throughout this dissertation.

Layer 3 can be identified through the process of identifying and naming the ways a social media site circulates, automates, and surveils. Bringing Layer 3 into the classroom means

encouraging students to develop a transferrable baseline of knowledge that will help them make more informed reading and composing decisions given our social media-saturated culture.

I want to reiterate in this section that any identifying and naming of machine agency we encourage our students to analyze is going to be imperfect since these parts of our technology are so often less visible or invisible to the average user. On one hand, this is because social media companies are less than transparent about how they make the choices they do on a platform. On the other hand, even if social media companies were more transparent about their choices and why they made them, all technologies inevitably create unexpected consequences despite the best intentions of human creators and users. Identifying Layer 3 depends on developing lateral reading strategies that allow one to better understand how and why a platform makes choices and on becoming familiar with alternative tools and technologies that help students more clearly see the invisible choices being made outside their control.

Students may benefit from first being introduced to the concepts of *circulation*, *automation*, and *surveillance*, in order: Students should have some familiarity with circulation given the introductory activity to the TSR layers, and that activity makes an excellent entry to uncovering some of the less visible features of a site given that it is easiest to see these features through lateral reading strategies<sup>19</sup> and attending to what counts as social media currency (or how “likes” or “follows” determine visibility and thus the likelihood of circulation over others). After *circulation*, I introduce the concept of *automation*, which involves becoming more aware about the choices computers make for us on our platforms. Having familiarity with circulation and how texts circulate online will help students identify the automation of personalized content. In terms of personalized content, automation means becoming aware that automations for one

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<sup>19</sup> As a reminder, *lateral-reading* is a term developed by Sam Wineburg and Sara McGrew to refer to reading across various pages and sources to gather necessary context (“Lateral Reading”).



user may be different than for another (as when Google returns different results to different users after the exact same search terms are entered). Additionally, automation involves identifying those features of a site that direct user's attention to the more visible features of Layer 2 (for example, the sounds and red notification icons on Facebook). *Surveillance* is best reserved as the last term introduced to students since its work is the most challenging to see and since identifying it requires knowledges developed through analysis of automation and circulation. Below, I share a number of activities and writing prompts that help students attend to Layer 3 of a TSR approach.

#### Circulation

*Circulation*, as I described in Chapter 3, refers to identifying the movement of online information, including how humans use platforms to circulate information to other humans; how information circulates across platforms, communities, and organizations; and how platforms circulate information to other technologies.

To bring a deeper awareness to circulation I have found it useful to introduce students to two terms: *root-source chasing* and *filter bubbles*.

Root-source chasing is similar to *citation chasing*, the practice of using a bibliography or works cited to chase down resources that were published earlier than a particular resource (Reitz). However, instead of searching for past scholarship, root-source chasing involves attempting to trace—while being emotionally aware—the source of a particular viral online text. Most often, root-source chasing involves exploring related links and using search-based online tools. With root-source chasing, students are encouraged to look at a post's larger context by searching related articles, webpages, or forum discussions; by looking at the original source of a shared text; or by searching for other sources that were published online that relate to the post.

To practice root-source chasing in class, I provide students with a viral story that seems sound or plausible but is often missing key information. (*Snopes.com* is a particularly good resource for this, but I've also collected screenshots of such stories through my own participation on social media). One example I like to begin with is the question asked by a popular meme: "Does Mr. Rogers have tattoos?" This meme has come up in many forms and has been shared on many different social media platforms. It most typically includes an image of Mr. Rogers with a description that explains he was a U.S. Navy Seal and wore long sweaters to cover up his tattoos (see figures 45 and 46).

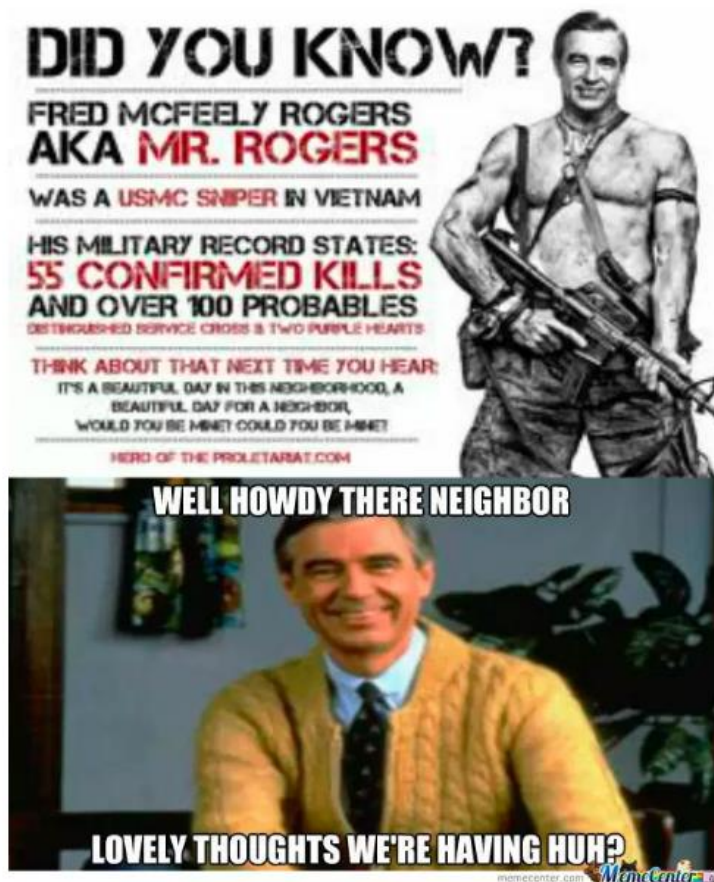


Figure 44: Mr. Rogers Sniper. [www.memecenter.com](http://www.memecenter.com). Retrieved 10 June 2019.

While some students find this meme believable and others not, a TSR approach encourages a

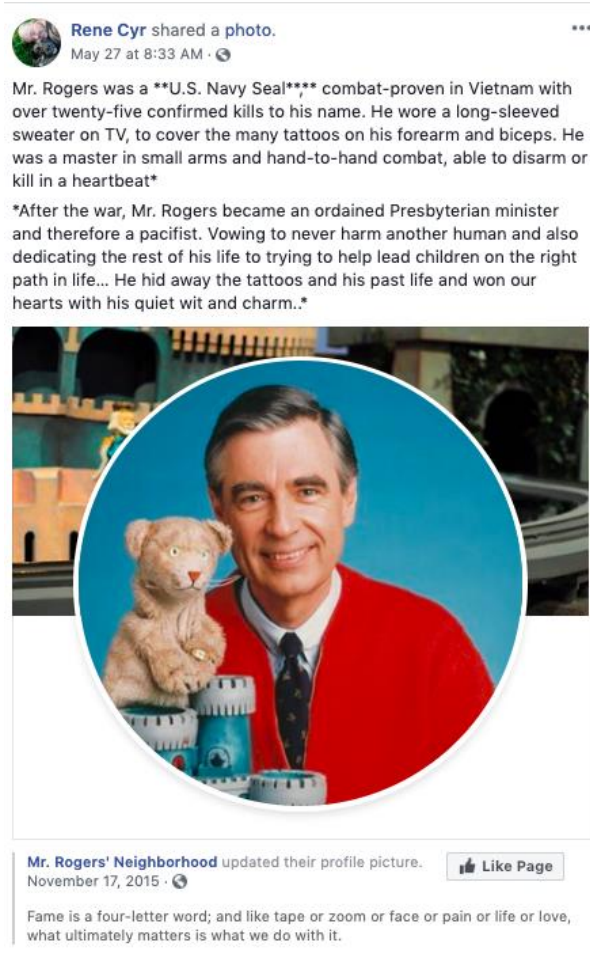


Figure 45: Mr. Rogers Tattoo Meme.  
[www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com). Retrieved 10 June 2019.

view that takes time before making assumptions about truth in order to attend to the larger context about why particular texts circulate and their affective dimensions. In other words, a TSR approach prioritizes first considering why something is shared and what emotional attachments people have to particular ideologies that resonate with a text.

After a reflection on the affective dimensions of a text, such understanding can then be brought to the process of root-source chasing, to identifying the source of information and how it has circulated online. Only after the human and technological dimensions are considered should

students be welcomed to determine a post's validity. In other words, emotional reflection and awareness is combined with an awareness of the technical infrastructure that enables the meme's circulation. The following activity leads students through this process.

- (1) Why would someone share this meme? What does the meme suggest they care about? Imagine what values or beliefs one might have if they made the choice to participate as an author on social media by circulated the meme?
- (2) How did this meme circulate online? What is the source of the meme? Take some time to *read laterally by root-source chasing*: in other words, read comments in response to the meme, search the image on Google image search, and look at outside websites through links and searches to forums and other websites related to the meme. What does your research tell you about the origins and validity of the meme?
- (3) What are the factors contributing to how this meme was shared? Please name both the human factors as well as factors that consider the social media currencies and how they determine how content is circulated.

As students move through this activity with the Mr. Rogers meme, they typically note that the meme resonates with those who want to express their support for veterans and what veterans offer to society after combat. Students sometimes bring up that the meme also resonates with values of masculinity and manliness, because the image of Mr. Rogers as a trained killer contrasts with his presentation on television as a gentle, caring, and passive person. Students may

also note that the meme echoes stories of the “born-again Christian”—of the figure who strayed from Christian beliefs before finding Christianity again and dedicating his life to what is considered godly or good.

After students have developed an awareness of the values and emotional reasons that the meme was shared, they can move to develop more awareness of its technical and social context through root-source chasing. Through reading comments, responses, and the deeper context of this meme, students discover that the meme is part of an online myth and that there are several websites that detail its origins. *Snopes.com* has a particularly in-depth article describing how Mr. Rogers never served in the military nor had any tattoos (“Mr. Rogers’ Rumor Neighborhood”).

After having a better understanding of the larger context of the meme through root-source chasing, students can describe the role of technology in sharing the meme: for example, the fact that technology allows anyone to quickly add additional textual bodies to an already existing image and then publishing and circulating the new textual bodies (as is the case with the meme in figure 46). Students can also discover through social media searches (since many platforms do not have a timeframe for uploaded content) that the myth seemed to be especially popular online in 2010 but has continued to circulate since. They may also note that a similar message seems to circulate across a number of named profiles as distinct textual bodies, meaning that social media platforms allow different profiles to copy and paste the same message and make it seem as though it is new or original writing. Or in other words, it is easy to take another’s written content on social media and circulate it as your own: the technology has not been designed to deter this form of authoring.

By analyzing these texts through the process of root-source chasing, students can also become aware of how texts circulate through being clipped and inserted into a new digital

context. Moreover, a post may be read under a different set of circumstances than the original post since it can be shared—with speed and ease—to various unintended audiences across different mediums and platforms. By root-source chasing, students are encouraged to become more mindful of the capacities of social media to circulate texts and how such circulation often means making other important contexts less immediately visible.

The second term I fold into analysis of circulation is *filter bubbles*. Filter bubbles, as I described in Chapter 3, is a term to describe the process of social media platforms automatically arranging what a user sees in their feed based on interaction with online content. Eli Pariser’s brief *Ted Talk* on filter bubbles offers students an introduction to the term, since it is likely not all of them will be familiar with it (“Beware’ Online Filter Bubbles”). Once a working definition of filter bubbles is established in class, students can complete an activity for becoming more aware of the forms of filter bubbles in their own social media feeds. For example, the prompt below can be used as an in-class activity or as a take-home reflective writing assignment:

What stories, videos, or posts tend to show up more than others on one of your feeds? Why might this be? What role does the social media platform seem to have in the curation of your feed?

Take some time to compare your feed with someone else’s: Does your feed appear dramatically different than theirs? What is being shown to you but not to them? Speculate about why this might be the case.

How does what is being shared with you shape the forms of composing you are invited to do on social media?

The goal in this reflective activity is help students identify the hidden rhetorical agency of machines as the machines make choices to determine what content is circulated and to whom.

A follow-up activity invites students to attempt to “break” their filter bubbles: They choose an issue about which they have an opinion and then they make different choices than they normally would with content to see how those choices change the curation of their feed’s content.

What kind of “filter bubbles” exist about your issue? What narratives or stories do you hear circulate about it?

What happens if you chose to react to the content in opposite ways, if you follow people you wouldn’t normally, or like things you wouldn’t normally like, or participate in discussions you wouldn’t normally?

How does your interaction on the platform shape the narratives and stories you see? Which ones are you resistant to hearing and why is that?

How are these other stories discussing your issue and what kind of articles or sources are being shared on the issue? What are the major ideologies and values that appear to be creating such a difference in opinions? What memes, hashtags, or images circulate the most from these different perspectives? And what do these different views tell you about public perspectives on the issue?

As students try to break their filter bubbles, I encourage them to adopt habits of careful listening and to seek out opinions on a topics that move them outside their own experiences. To do this, they should feel no need to extend listening practices to posts that are less ethical—as in posts that communicate via harassment, advertising, or propaganda. I often share a metaphor for this activity in class: if our technologies are organizing topics based on black or white perspectives (or blue and red perspectives), how can your resist these binaries to explore the gray (or purple) area? It’s also helpful for students, after completing these reflections, to consider what is not being discussed and what conversations are not happening.

Once students are familiar with the basics of circulation, we can move to consider more deeply how such circulations are informed through machine automations.

#### Automation

Automation involves how machines have been programmed to run autonomously in order to store, organize, display, or send notifications about specific content. Students can be introduced to automation by tracking the notifications they receive through their social media platforms, whether those notifications be via phone, tablet, television, or computer. I often refer to this form of tracking as an “automation journal.” Below is an example of a prompt for an automation journal.

Pick a morning, afternoon, or evening and track what is automated for you by your technology as you navigate, compose, and read online. You may track what recommendations you get, how words or sentences are automated for you, or what your technology reminds you to do (such as the notifications you receive when someone responds to your message). Basically, any action in your



technology that is *done for you* that you do not control. (Apps, settings, and technology that automatically start for you can also count. For example, when I start up my email, the font is automatically black). Also consider links that are automated for you (such as any “trending story” or ad links on Facebook).

Write this down as a timeline journal that describes each automated instance you encounter.

*Note:* This activity will work best if you do it on your own personal device with the sites you most often use.

After completing the automation journals at home, students can be invited in the next class period to consider what values are behind what is automated and the consequences these automations have on the features of Layer 1. Students see how they are guided to read and compose in some places but not others and how they are invited to make certain actions over other possibilities. And they see how the places and actions to which they are guided most often mean either spending more time on the social media platform or providing that application more revenue opportunities—all ethical consequences aside. Students are also able to more easily trace how the machine-chosen personalization, which we often value and appreciate, can lead to political polarizations, making it more challenging to truly hear or listen to other’s perspectives and stories.

Often in students’ discussion of their automation journals, they describe a form of “automation fatigue,” the exhaustive sense that they must always stay alert and responsive to whatever their machines alert them to. I provide students in class with time to take some small

steps to declutter their technology automations in order to diminish this fatigue: for example, rather than receiving every notification that Twitter provides, students may choose to only receive direct messenger notifications. Or they may turn off notifications for some applications, such as Instagram, that they view as less time-sensitive.

Once students are aware of circulation and automation, they can move to becoming knowledgeable about how these processes are dependent on machine surveillance.

#### Surveillance

By *surveillance*, I refer to the features of our machines that read and store data based on the choices we make as we use a platform. Machine surveillance is how our platform technologies read and store information in order to determine circulation and automation processes.

Surveillance may be the least tangible of the less visible features of Layer 3 because users are most divorced from its actions.

To familiarize students with processes of machine surveillance, I introduce them to readings that provide more information about how surveillance works and why. In particular, I've found it useful to introduce students to texts that describe how a computer reads information differently than a person. Nathan Hulseley and Joshua Reeves *Surveillance & Society* article, "The Gift that Keeps Giving," provides context for surveillance by describing how the multiplayer online game *Ingress* presented itself as a free platform for users, but the reality is that the game gathered information about users' geographical locations and users, making *Ingress* one of most prolific data-mining tools of the last decade (389). More recent news articles describe how surveillance data from *Ingress* users was used by the game company Niantic to populate the locations for Pokéstops and Gyms in the popular application *Pokémon go* and may also be assigned as course readings (Bogle). In this instance, a company used the surveillance data from

one platform to develop another platform, but students may also benefit from discussions about recent news events related to surveillance that help them become more aware of the other ways platforms circulate surveillance data to other parties (third party advertisers, political organizations, state and federal government institutions, etc.). For instance, Frontline has a free episode of *United States of Secrets*, which details governmental surveillance programs and their relationship to digital technologies.

Students can also be invited to consider what forms of surveillance are necessary to make possible the automations they noted in the automation journal activity. By considering what machine surveillance is required for automations, students can see how surveillance impacts their social media use in helpful ways (for example, when *Spotify* uses AI surveillance to recommend a new artist) versus when surveillance appears invasive (such as when *Facebook* sold user data to Cambridge Analytica).

Additionally, to address surveillance in the composition classroom, I've found it useful to follow the recommendations of Estée Beck in "The Invisible Digital Identity" and introduce students to resources that help them understand and take control over how their own personal data is surveilled. Beck describes in particular how the Ghostery browser extension may be used to help students see who is tracking their data and provide them options for opting out, but there are several other tools for seeing machine surveillance and protecting one's privacy.

To begin this form of exploration, it helps to let students see how well their own technologies protect them from surveillance. I begin with resources related to internet browsers first (as oppose to social media applications downloaded on a phone or other device), since some social media applications so often use browser history to curate results. *Panopticlick* is a quick web resource that allows students to see if their browser is blocking tracking ads, blocking

invisible trackers, and protecting them against fingerprinting<sup>20</sup>. The site also offers a browser extension called *Privacy Badger*, which blocks all invisible trackers on one's browser.

Students can also benefit from exploring alternative browsers and search engines that are designed to prioritize privacy and that offer alternatives to the widely-used services provided by companies such as Google. For example, the *Brave Browser* is a Chrome-based open-source browser that blocks advertisements and tracking cookies by default. And *Duck Duck Go*—a search engine that emphasizes protecting searchers' privacy and avoiding the filter bubbles of personalized search—provides an alternative to Google's search engine.

Browser webpages can also be assigned as texts for classroom analysis. For example, students can compare and contrast Google Chrome's browser homepage with that of the TorProject, a browser designed to provide private access to an uncensored internet ("Browse Privately. Explore Freely."). (Interestingly, Tor was used during the governmental censorship that took place during the Arab Spring of 2010.) Following analysis of the TorProject homepage, students can be invited to download a browser like Tor and compare its features to that of their regular, go-to browser. Students can also be invited to read the privacy policies of popular social media platforms and compare them to recent news stories about the platform's surveillance. For instance, students could read Snapchat's privacy page, which is short and written in a fairly straightforward manner free of technical jargon. One noteworthy moment in Snapchat's privacy policy involves their discussion of users' photo and video access: Snapchat describes their access to photos as simply part of the "Information We Get When You Use Our Services" and explains that "Many of our services require us to collect images and other information from your device's camera and photos. For example, you won't be able to send Snaps or upload photos from your

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<sup>20</sup> Fingerprinting means being able to identify a person based on their unique browser features.

camera roll unless we can access your camera or photos” (Privacy Policy). This privacy policy can be contrasted with a 2019 *Vice* story that details how employees spied on users by using SnapLion, an internal tool used by various departments to access Snapchat users’ data (“Snapchat Employees Abused Data Access to Spy on Users”).

Attention to circulation, automation and surveillance as part of a Layer 3 analysis poses new challenges for the composition class. I do believe, however, that approaching these issues can open help us consider how what we don’t see nonetheless impacts our day-to-day lives. By calling attention to this third layer, we can help students develop more rhetorical awareness and further confidence in their understanding of the machines on which social media platforms depend.

#### TSR Approach in the Composition Classroom: Final Analysis of a Social Media Platform

Once students have familiarity with analyzing the three layers, they can pull them together to compose a formally written rhetorical analysis. Below I offer an assignment sequence asking students to compose an analysis uniting all three layers. Teachers can develop their own class discussions, peer workshops, and activities to support these assignments.

#### **Choose a Social Media Post**

Choose a current social media post that discusses or reacts to an important current story or event. Please ensure that this post is publicly searchable on the platform. (If it is not, please censor the names and images of those who participated in its authoring.) It is best to choose a post that personally resonates with you in some way and also bears significant social weight in this moment.

Here are some examples of posts from which you might choose: a written update, a meme, a response with a trending hashtag, an Instagram story, a gallery of images shared on Instagram, a Snapchat story, a Pin or Pinterest board, a blog post on Tumblr, etc. You can also choose to analyze a shared article, podcast, or video but please ensure there are at least two textual bodies to examine if you choose this option.

Note: Please include a screenshot (or video)

*To take a screenshot on a computer:*

- 1 Press Command-Shift-4.
- 2 Move the crosshair pointer to where you want to start the screenshot.
- 3 Drag to select an area.
- 4 When you've selected the area you want, release your mouse or trackpad button.
- 5 Find the screenshot as a .png file on your desktop.

### **Assignment 1: Analysis of Layer 1**

Begin your analysis by taking notes on the features of Layer 1. As a reminder, this means using multimodal analysis to analyze the post in terms of authorship and textual bodies.

Please refer to the terms and prompts in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Writer/Designer* for a review of the multimodal rhetorical terms (audience, context, purpose, ethos, pathos, logos, and the 5 modes).

*Authorship:* Who or what authored the content? Is the content entirely a user's own composing or a group or organization? Is the user sharing another's content (whose and where is it from)? Is the user responding or interacting with another's shared content? Is the user revising or remixing the content in some way? Is the user adding additional comments or to a post? Who or what are the actors participate in the sharing and publishing of content?

*Textual bodies:* What textual bodies appear to be the primary (as in more the more immediate, visible, or dominant text)? What texts appear to be secondary or more minor? What texts are immediately connected to the text, through links, responses to the text, shared ownership, or different forms of co-authoring? What other texts is a viewer likely to encounter on the way to getting to this text?

Once you've completed your notes, compose a two-page analysis that attends to the responsibility of the post: does it meet the conditions for ethics we discussed in the first few weeks of class or does it tend more toward harassment,

advertising, or propaganda. Or, is it a mix of both? No need to worry about an introduction or conclusion to this right now. Just focus on getting some ideas down as you analyze.

Pick a morning, afternoon, or evening and track what is automated for you by your technology as you navigate, compose, and read online. You may track what recommendations you get, how words or sentences are automated for you, or what your technology reminds you to do (such as the notifications you receive when someone responds to your message). Basically, any change in your technology that is *done for you* that you do not control. Apps, settings, and technology that automatically starts for you can also count. (Example: when I start up my email, the font is automatically black).

Write this down as a timeline journal that describes each automated instance you encounter.

*Note:* This activity will work best if you do it on your own personal device with the sites you most often use.

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## **Assignment 2: Analysis of Layer 2**



Your last assignment focused on the content of the post. As we move now to analyze Layer 2, you will attend to how the design of the website (its template) impacts how its content is read. To begin, go to the social media platform on which you found your post and take notes in response to the following questions:

*List and describe:* What do you notice about the text's design and arrangement?

List all the design elements you see on the text and try to be as specific as possible. For example, instead of saying the text uses "color," describe the color with as many details as you can: What color(s)? Where it is the color is located? How noticeable is it? [Hint: Imagine you are trying to describe what it looks like over the phone.] Design elements can include layout, color, perspective, size, movement, shape, style, sound, volume, silence, tone of voice, use of white space, arrangement, body gestures, facial expressions, borders, framing, font choice, tone, brightness, contrast, background, and foreground.

*Associate:* What kind of attitudes, emotions, and/or values do we associate with the design elements you've listed? Attitudes and emotions involve how people feel or their disposition toward things. Values involve what people care about or feel are important socially, culturally, and politically. Try to write down a bit of each for your design choices.

Once you've completed your notes, compose two pages of analysis that describes what kind of relationship the overall design of the social media site is creating with

its readers and how. Be sure to refer to specific elements of the text to support your adjectives.

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### **Assignment 3: Tying Layers 1 and 2 Together**

Reread your last two assignments. What connections, comparisons, and differences do you note between the design of the site and the behaviors it encourages and how a user participates with a post? How does the design of the site influence a user's perception of Layer 1? What do you notice about Layer 1 now that you've gathered some context about the design of the social media environment it was shared within? What questions do you still have about the post that could help with further research into the event or the platform?

Please compose at least 1 page describing your findings and bring a copy of a document that includes assignments 1, 2, and 3 to our next class.

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### **Assignment 4: Researching Layer 3**

As we move into analysis of Layer 3, please keep in mind that we will now analyze the post's features in terms of the invisible layers of a social media context:

circulation, automation, and surveillance. Some of the prompts below may be more helpful for you than others in exploring the deeper context of the post, so choose the ones you think will work best for you given your platform. Remember to take detailed notes.

*Circulation:* Explore backtracking on the platform: What groups or organizations are associated with this social media post? What do you know about them? Be sure to click on links, explore user-profiles, and search hashtags associated with the post (keep in mind our lateral-reading search strategies from earlier in the semester). In addition, what is the social media “currency”? Is it likes and follows or something else? How does the social media currency relate to the speed and breadth of circulation of the post? And finally, is this post related to other current trending stories or other publications? (For example, is there are any scientific or academic articles tied to this event? Be sure to bring those into your notes as well.)

*Automation:* What is automated for you on this platform? How did the automations effect the circulation questions you considered above? Did this post surface on your feed on your own or did you have to actively search for it? How does this tell you about the tendencies of the social media platform to make choices for users? What do users not have control over in relation to the post? How might those who see this post have different automations then those that

don't? Why may this be? Take note of any stories or sources recommended to you by algorithms based on your engagement with this post.

*Surveillance:* Take note of what kind of machine reading is happening surrounding this post based on your notes on circulation and automation. What data is being read by the social media platform? What is their privacy policy like? Are there any third-parties that appear to be associated with this post? Was it promoted in any way? Does the post have connections to any past web search history you have had? What can you find out about this social media platform and how it tracks user data (review privacy policies, the company website, technology forums or websites, or search the platform on Wikipedia to get gather any knowledge you can about the platform's use of data)?

You do not need to answer every question, but be sure to have substantial notes on circulation, automation, and surveillance prepared for our class discussion.

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### **Assignment 5: Folding Layer Three Into your TSR Analysis**

Read back over your assignments 1-3. What did your research for Layer 3 in Assignment 4 further reveal to you about this post and its ethical potential? Use your notes from Assignment 4 to add at least 1 more page to your analysis. The below questions may help you get started if you find you are stuck:

*What connections, comparisons, and differences do you note between the design of the site and the behaviors it is encouraging and how a user participates with a post? How does the design of the site influence a user's perception of Layer 1?*

*What do you notice about Layer 1 now that you've gathered some context about the design of the social media environment it was shared within?*

*And finally, what questions do you still have? (Use these to help point you toward further research into the post or platform you are focusing on.)*

Please compose at least 1 page describing your findings and questions. Please bring a copy of Assignments 1-4 to class as well.

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### **Assignment 6: Complete Draft of Your TSR Analysis**

At this point, you should have feedback from your peers in response to notes and writing about the layers. This assignment asks you to revise and expand your writing into a six- to eight-page analysis in which you state an explicit purpose:

Your analysis calls out the ethical values at work on and in the site.

At this point you will want to also draft an introduction that states the purpose of your analysis, include several paragraphs of analysis that addresses each layer, and draft a conclusion that sums up your key findings.

## Conclusion

I hope you can see how the three preceding chapters culminate in the classroom activities and writing prompts I've just described. Chapter 1 defines ethics as social-relational, and thus creates an understanding about what ethical foundations are necessary to compose in meaningful and transformative ways. Chapter 2 argues that technology and material environments have their own agential roles in all communications and thus structure our ability to meet the conditions of social-relationality. Chapter 3 introduces and defines a three-layered multimodal approach of TSR and demonstrates this approach through two different TSR analyses. And now Chapter 4 has used all that earlier to underlie a series of activities that help students both analyze and produce communications whose ethics they understand.

I believe that—by approaching composition courses with a TSR approach that asks students to become critical of the design of and communication that takes place on social media—we take important and necessary steps to guide students toward thoughtful, engaging, and responsible writing, given the current role of social media technologies in our lives. And by focusing on communication that takes place on social media platforms, we also ask students to question and consider the relationships they desire to shape with others and whether or not their current technologies make that possible. And finally, as students are asked to become critical of the design and infrastructure of social media technologies, they also take steps toward imagining more responsible writing technologies.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I bring together the relational ethics of feminist critical theory with approaches of multimodal rhetoric to examine the ethical implications of composing on social media platforms. Most social media platforms are designed to value consumerism, efficiency, quantity of web traffic, and constant synchronous response over concerns of responsible and critical communication. I propose a TSR approach as an intervention against such corporate-minded design. Through this approach, I address how we so often fail to recognize the material and environmental circumstances that affect the composing we do on social media platforms, instead preferring to place all blame on human users for any form of ethical inadequacy. Or, on the other hand, we fall into problematic patterns of technological determinism, the belief that technology determines human conditions. By considering the responsibility of our machines as much as ourselves, I lay a foundation for the multimodal writing pedagogies I would like to see implemented in composition courses. More specifically, I explain how a TSR approach may be brought to the classroom to help students see how civil engagement is not limited to people's social responsibilities but is rather entwined in complex, material-technical contexts.

I've included some student reflections produced in my Spring 2017 course to illustrate some of the ways students are engaging with a TSR approach in the first-year writing classroom.

Before taking this class, I had little to no knowledge on surveillance. I did not know how Google watched our every move, and how social media sites tracked us to provide ads and more features...I think that it will now be a priority for me to stay up to date with the surveillance that websites and the government places on technology, to guarantee my privacy isn't being invaded. Although, I feel I am a much different online surfer than I

previously was, I hope to continue to learn more about social media and technology in order for me to be the best online citizen as possible.

As for the future and moving forward with my use of technology in my life, I hope to be a lot more aware of what is on social media and the effects of it. I also hope to share some of the information I learned with people who may not be aware of these things or don't see the importance of them. For example, my mom, who is starting out on Facebook right now and in general becoming slightly more in tune with social media. It would be extremely beneficial to inform her of all social media is capable of, especially when it comes to one of our past discussions on fake news and identifying when it's a reliable source and when it's a scam. I hope in the future that I continue to notice these things, be aware of them, and strive to not be controlled by social media.

This class has taught me about the importance of responsibility in regards to technology, specifically social media. This information is something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and use it every day. The main focus is to be conscious of how I carry myself on the internet and to respect everyone. I also need to think of everything I put on the internet as permanent.

I will stay informed by continuing to read up on the new changes that social media apps make to the application by either reading the updated terms and or googling what the updates consists of. Not just clicking "agree," but actually go through the list of changes and see what they are about. I advise people to start reading the conditions of all the



different social media apps out there because if you don't read it and just accept it something could be happening to your personal information that you wouldn't have agreed with if you known. But if you take the time to read what the changes are, you are well aware and can determine if you still want to use the application knowing exactly what you are getting yourself into.

As these samples of student writing illustrate, none of the students I taught in the three semesters of the pilot course had previously been asked to consider the rhetorical role of the invisible features of technology before our class. Practicing a TSR approach not only allowed them to become further aware of the role of social media technology in their life, but also inspired them to become more informed online citizens and to take their knowledge to others who have not had such opportunities.

While I have been able to address a number of questions through a theoretical investigation of ethics and through the development of a TSR approach, my dissertation has also created a number of new questions. For instance, my writing on a TSR approach has brought to light the significance of emotional awareness in a technological environment where content is able to be published and circulated so quickly. How might we move toward cultivating deeper emotional intelligence and emotional resilience in our rhetorical practices, especially given current composing technologies? What kinds of emotion-focused learning will help others pause to reflect on the consequences of the choices they make online? What are the shortcomings of current interpretations of emotional intelligence and how those practices are carried forward into a social media context?

Relatedly, I've also considered how—when we ask students to read within social media environment—there is always the danger that they might be exposed to emotionally traumatizing material. While a TSR approach encourages students to explore how communication circulates on a platform, there is no way for an instructor to be in control of the text they are exposed to. We don't have to worry about this when we assign print-based texts or even a particular online article, but within social media environments, we must consider the emotional weight students might have to endure in order to “examine all sides” and research within these networked environments—especially those marginalized students in our course who are likely to have experienced online harassment already. How might we consider how to develop students' rhetorical knowledge of these sites while also preventing them from being exposed to trolling or other forms of online hate?

My final question involves what to do now to resist the control and lack of transparency of social media platforms. So often when writing this dissertation it was easy to feel helpless: we don't have control over how our data is stored or shared with other organizations, we barely have any control over how information is curated in our platforms, and platforms repeatedly fail to police hate speech. When regulation does happen, it has less than desirable consequences: for instance, within the last few years, YouTube demonetized sex education and LGBTQ+ videos, (Farokhmanesh) and Instagram has deleted content and accounts of activists who challenge normative sex and gender scripts (Warren and Warzel). Such policy-driven censorship disproportionately silences marginalized voices on these platforms. I believe future conversations in our field must attend to social media regulation by examining and becoming more knowledgeable about current law, by considering how these knowledges may be brought to

our writing classes, and by focusing on community-engaged projects that address platform regulation.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### Education

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2011-2012), Milwaukee, WI: MA, emphasis in Composition and Rhetoric, awarded December 2012

Master's Project: Crafting' Subjectivity: Communication, Community, and Ethics of Ravelry  
Committee Chair: Dr. Anne Wysocki

Columbia College Chicago (2008-2010), Chicago, IL: MFA in Poetry, awarded May 2010

Central Michigan University (2005-2008), Mount Pleasant, MI: BA (cum laude), English with a poetry concentration, awarded May 2008

### College and university teaching history

University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin (Milwaukee, WI)  
Graduate Teaching Assistant, English, 2011-Present

#### *Courses Taught:*

Fundamentals of Composition (ENG095)  
Introduction to College Writing (ENG101 and ENG101 Online)  
College Writing and Research (ENG102 and ENG102 Hybrid)  
Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Culture (ENG102 Multimodal Section)  
Writing, Research, and Responsibility in Social Media Culture (ENG 240)

Columbia College Chicago (Chicago, IL)  
Graduate Student Instructor, English, 2009-2011

#### *Courses Taught:*

Introduction to College Writing (ENGL 108)  
Writing and Rhetoric Enhanced (ENGL 111)  
Writing and Rhetoric II (ENGL 112)  
Beginning Poetry Workshop (ENGL 150)

### Publications

Review of "Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave," by Pegeen Reichert Powell. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, Fall 2015

Review of "Feminist Rhetorical Resilience," edited by Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Anne Brady. *Composition Studies*, Spring 2013

### National Conferences, Workshops, and Presentations

"Techno-social Relationality: A Feminist Pedagogical Approach to Social Media," Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kansas City, MO, March 2018

“‘This is What Democracy Looks Like’: Digital Space, Political Action,” Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference, Dayton OH, October 2017

“What “Counts” in Digital Scholarship?: Contributions to the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative Wiki” Computers and Writing, Findlay OH, June 2017

“Ethics and Digitality: A Feminist Rhetorical Approach to Social Networking Spaces,” Watson Conference, Louisville KY, October 2016

“Rethinking Facebook: Feminist Readings and Revisions,” Rhetoric Society of America, Atlanta GA, May 2016

“Facebook Identities: Public and Private,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Houston TX, April 2016

“Crafting Multimodal Rhetorics,” Rhetoric Society of America Institute, Madison WI, June 2015

“Rustic or Vintage Glam?: Pinterest as a Wedding Planning Tool,” Computers and Writing, Stout WI, May 2015

“How (and Why) to Write for Machines,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Tampa FL, March 2015

“Pinning the [Austere] Home Space: Digital Accumulation and Consumption of Pinterest,” Computers and Writing, Pullman WA, June 2014

“What Face Are We Responding To?: Perceptions of Interface and Identities in Online Classrooms.” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Indianapolis IN, March 2014

“Frogging the Digital: A Craft Community’s Re-conception of Digital Space.” Feminisms and Rhetorics, Stanford CA, September 2013

“Crafting Subjectivity,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Las Vegas NV, March 2013

“Considering Ethos in a Craft Economy,” Watson Conference, Louisville KY, October 2012

#### Awards and grants

*AOP Fellowship*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017, 2018

*James A. Sappenfield Fellowship*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015, 2016

*Student Success Award* (ENG101), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013

*Frederick J. Hoffman Award*, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, 2013

*Chancellor’s Award*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015

*UWM Graduate Student Travel Award*, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016

*Alice Gilliam Award*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012

*GETZ Scholarship*, Columbia College, 2009- 2010

*DePaul Writing Conference Scholarship*, DePaul University, 2009

*Graduate Merit Award*, Columbia College Chicago, 2008- 2009

Professional organizations

Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)

Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition (CFSHRC)

Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA)

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)