

NEGOTIATING SELF, SOCIALITY, AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE:  
METADISOURSE, AUDIENCE DESIGN, FACE-WORK, AND GENRE IN  
COMPUTER MEDIATED DISCOURSE

By

ELIZABETH G. MAURER

BA, The University of Victoria, 1994  
MA, Dalhousie University, 1996

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

December 2008

©Elizabeth G. Maurer

## Abstract

This dissertation addresses claims about the internet's effects on language and, by extension, on identity, social relations, and social orders. It investigates three areas of language competency which produce and are produced by people's knowledge of social roles and relations: linguistic pragmatics, metadiscourse about computer-mediated discourse (CMD), and genre. The dissertation argues that these competencies are forms of "local knowledge" (Appadurai, 1996, 180), upon which subjects draw to reproduce local contexts in which subjectivity and social relations can be meaningfully experienced and understood. However, because of new conditions for writing and speech online (such as interactivity, anonymity, and possibilities for public address), and evolving expectations about mobility and borders, Internet users face challenges to their ability to reproduce such local knowledge—or they face the possibility that discourse change might prove an occasion for transforming local roles and relations.

Examining how internet users negotiate the production of local knowledge in these conditions shows that existing theoretical understandings of metadiscourse (such as "netiquette" discourse), of technology's effects on the pragmatics of audience design, and of genre evolution need to be adjusted. As part of reframing the internet's effects on these competencies, the dissertation proposes that social theorist Erving Goffman's observations about "face-work" (1955; 1959) are a valuable contribution to studies of pragmatics, genre, and metadiscourse, both online and offline.

Chapter One surveys scholarly and folk assumptions about language, identity, and sociality online and argues that such discourse needs to be questioned in light of CMD's challenges to local knowledge. Chapter Two examines the linguistic pragmatics of audience design in asynchronous CMD, analyzing national news discourse and the evolution and functions of "netiquette" literature. Two chapters about online genres examine how rhetors respond to the possibilities for civic writing and hence for enhancing citizenship. The first of these analyzes a new genre, the "homeless blog," along with the network of public responses to it; the second investigates the evolution of an older, established genre by examining, through comparative and corpus-based analysis, petitioning and electronic petitioning of the Canadian House of Commons.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>vii</b>

### Chapter One

<b>“Ordinary Human Fellowship, But It’s Bigger and More Precise”: Subjectivity, Sociality, and Language Online</b> .....	<b>1</b>
--	----------

Introduction: Language in the Coffee Shop (and the Virtual Coffee Shop) .....	1
Objectives and Materials .....	6
<b>Part One: Scholarly and Folk Explanations of CMD, Identity, and Community</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Critical Perspectives on the Online Subject .....	12
Critical Perspectives on Sociality Online .....	23
Questioning Assumptions about Language .....	20
Recognizing the Subject Under the Pseudonym .....	20
Putting on Others’ Speech.....	22
New Subjects in Public Metadiscourse (On the Internet, No one (Everyone) Knows You’re a Dog.....	25
<b>Part Two: When Thou Enter a City Abide by its Customs: Metadiscourse and the Local</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Ordinary Human Fellowship.....	32
Local Contexts of “Technology” and “Communication” .....	36
Redefining “Local” in Studies of CMD .....	40
Overview of Chapters.....	42

### Chapter Two

<b>“Where is Here?” and “Know Where You Are”: The Problem of “Co-presence” Online</b> .....	<b>45</b>
---	-----------

Introduction: Approaching the Problem of “Copresence” .....	45
<b>Part One: Technology and New Kinds of “Copresence”</b> .....	<b>48</b>
The Guarantee of Relevance .....	48
Estimating What is “Mutually Manifest” to Self and Others.....	49
Mutual Manifestness in Online “Conversations” .....	52
Adjusting to Media: Critical Perspectives on “Grounding” and “Relevance” .....	55
“Where is Here?”: A New Question for Theories of Grounding and Relevance in CMD.....	58
<b>Part Two: Face-work and Relevance in CMD</b> .....	<b>67</b>
Who Are We and What Do We Know Online .....	67

Establishing Social Roles and Relations .....	73
Instructions on Audience Design for Newbies and Oldtimers .....	77
Physical copresence.....	78
Linguistic copresence.....	80
<b>Part Three: Knowing “Where you are”—and Letting Others Know .....</b>	<b>82</b>
Netiquette and Locality .....	82
Other Metadiscourse, Other Lines: Canadian Connectivity and Expertise.....	86
Canadians and Overhearers.....	90
Conclusion.....	95

### Chapter Three

#### **The Homeless Blog: Negotiating Local Consensus About Genre Innovation ..... 97**

Genre as Action, Genre as Local Knowledge .....	97
The Homeless Blog: Negotiating Public Meta-Discourse .....	111
Diaries and Cardboard Signs: New Rhetorical Situations and “Antecedent Genres” .....	112
Street Newspapers and Tip Jars: Resisting Uptakes .....	123
New and Improved: Innovation and Evolution in Theories of Online Genre.....	126
Public Meta-Genre and Face-Work.....	132
Monitoring Disruption: Genre Evolution.....	145

### Chapter Four

#### **Petitioning Canada Online: Genre Adaptation and Local Genre Systems..... 151**

<b>Part One: Local and Extra-Local Ways of Writing.....</b>	<b>157</b>
The Petition and Change: Ancient Rights, New Voices, and Digital Clipboards.....	157
17,000 Signatures Rejected: “Perceived Affordances” and Genre as Local.....	161
Local Adaptations to E-Petitioning Affordances: Digital Signatures Abroad.....	163
Monitoring Change in the Petition: What’s at Stake?.....	172
<b>Part Two: The Canadian House of Commons Petition as a Local Case .....</b>	<b>175</b>
Social Actions of the Petition .....	175
Petitioning as political input .....	175
Petitioning and citizen subjects.....	176
Petitioning and community .....	178
Local Genre Knowledge: System and Features of the Canadian House of Commons Petition.....	179
Anticipating Uptake: “Genre System” and Accepted Features.....	181
Rule-Breaking Petitioners, Crusading MPs, and the Modernization Committee: Genre Systems and Change.....	184
<b>Part Three: Canadian Petitioners Navigating Local Knowledge at Online Petition Sites.....</b>	<b>190</b>
A Key Public Uptake in the Genre System: The Presentation-of-Petition .....	193
Presentation-of-Petition Corpus Features.....	193
Signature numbers.....	196
Emphasis on signatory location and identity.....	198

Intertextuality: Implications for E-Petitioners.....	198
Bigger is better .....	198
Foreign signatories .....	200
Identifying signatory location .....	200
Soliciting and giving comments.....	202
Authorial and Signatory Choices in Canadian E-Petitions .....	204
Methods.....	204
Making arrangements for signatories.....	206
Foreign signatories .....	208
Location.....	209
Prompting comments in e-petitions.....	212
Conclusions: Genre Evolution in Familiar Genres .....	218
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<b>Conclusion: Evolving Discourse Practices and the Local.....</b>	<b>222</b>
Locality: Insights into Online and Offline Communication.....	223
Metadiscourse: Beyond Order and Standardization.....	225
Change: Evolving Consciousness of Language and Technology .....	231
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Appendix A: Presentations-of-Petition Corpus.....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Appendix B: Electronic Petitions Corpus .....</b>	<b>250</b>

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to the graduate students and faculty in the UBC English Department who have fostered a collegial and rich research environment.

I offer my gratitude in particular to my supervisory committee members Dr. Glenn Deer and Dr. Sherrill Grace for their attention to my work and their flexibility.

Most of all I thank Dr. Janet Giltrow for her ongoing passion for and engagement with her students' research, including this dissertation, her generosity, and her continued support at all stages of the dissertation project.

I gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for their financial support.

To my husband, Byron.

“Ordinary Human Fellowship, But It’s Bigger and More Precise”: Subjectivity,  
Sociality, and Language Online

1. Well there’s a revolution going on in rec rooms, offices, and classrooms around the world. A revolution in which 15 million people are taking part. They’re sharing scientific data, arguing philosophy, or passing on cooking tips and gossip night and day through a computer network called “Internet.” For about \$200 a year they log on to personal computers connected to phone lines and communicate across cultures and continents.

...

You need a computer and a phone, and suddenly you’re part of a new mesh of people, programs, archives, ideas. Playwright and Internet enthusiast John Allen says it feels a bit like ordinary human fellowship, but it’s bigger and more precise.

...

The Internet is growing like an embryonic brain at a rate of 10% a month. It’s all pure, clear, free, unregulated communication, although some of the regulators are thinking about changing that. US Congressional Hearings into the Internet begin next month. Here in Canada, nothing yet. Borders still count for something.

Oct. 8, 1993

“A network called 'Internet'” Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

<http://archives.cbc.ca/400d.asp?id=1-75-710-4205&wm6=1>

Host: Peter Mansbridge; Reporter: Bill Cameron

2. “When thou enter a city abide by its customs.” -- The Talmud

Patrick Crispen, “Map07: Netiquette,” *Patrick Crispen’s Internet Roadmap* (accessed February 27, 2006)

3. The Internet is anonymous and electronic but, culturally, it is a genuine microcosm of any city in America. There is beauty and fun and intelligence, and bad manners, and ignorance, and ugliness. Unlike a city, however, the Net has no law enforcement. It is an Information Highway without a highway patrol. Like the Autobahn, there is no speed limit. Those who use the highway police themselves. In such a place, good manners, patience, and tolerance are the keys to productive communication.

Rita Laws, 1999, “Netiquette (Internet Etiquette) and Emoticons (Emotion Icons)” (accessed February 27, 2006)

*Introduction: Language in the Coffee Shop (and the Virtual Coffee Shop)*

Imagine running into your colleague “Peter” on a Saturday morning in a long lineup at a downtown coffee shop. Late Friday afternoon, something happened at your well-known company with the potential to affect Peter and yourself: a memo fell into

another coworker's hands strongly suggesting your employer embezzled money from shareholders in your company. Around you in the coffee shop stand strangers within hearing range; with your colleague is a woman he introduces as his wife, a young woman (you know from past conversations with your colleague) who teaches French immersion at an elementary school. While you wait in the lineup, you want to converse politely (that is, you want to maintain "face" as a polite person by not offending anyone present) and to find out about any new developments in your work situation. You could make any one of the following statements (by no means an exhaustive list):

**(1a).** So, you were around the office late yesterday--did Barb decide what to do about the proof of Westin's activities?

**(1b).** So, did our friend from down the hall make any decisions about that memo?

**(1c).** So, do you know if anything happened regarding you-know-what?

**(1d).** Let's definitely step out for a smoke and chat before you go...So, are you two going to that French festival this weekend?

**(1e).** Let's definitely step out for a smoke and chat before you go...So, I hear there's a French festival going on this weekend. Do you know anything about it?

Obviously there is not enough time to compile such a list in your head and then go through the pros and cons of each one. But as a speaker with responsibilities in the encounter, you do need to engage with a host of questions so that your utterance meets your needs and the needs of your colleague and his wife as much as possible.

Is there a chance that any of the other people in the lineup is somehow connected with your workplace? If so, clearly **(1a)** is too explicit, making you, your colleague, and possibly his wife nervous. Would any of the overhearers understand oblique references to

your office situation? If so, then perhaps something like **(1c)** is better than **(1b)**. Since you can assume your colleague sees the overhearers, do you think he would agree with your assessment? Since you know that your colleague is a more direct person than you, you might judge that he would be annoyed by **(1c)** because he has to work harder to figure out what you are getting at. Moreover, since it would be rude to treat his wife like any other overhearer, can you assume that his wife would also be able to follow oblique references and to understand why they are necessary? If not, **(1b)** or **(1c)** might make her feel left out of the conversation, or might result in a disastrous response like “Are you talking about that problem at work with the memo showing your boss embezzled money from the shareholders?” To pursue these questions just a little further, if it is necessary to take option **(1d)**, that is, to imply that the matter is urgent but too sensitive even for oblique discussion in front of others, and then to make small talk about weekend plans, can you safely assume that Jack and his wife are likely to know of “*the* French festival” and choose **(1d)** instead of **(1e)** “*a* French festival”? And could you expect his wife to know that in you were asking out of politeness to her (because of her interest in French), since she may not know that her husband has told you what she does for a living?

All of these estimations of the setting, the situation, and the participants and their knowledge—as well as your and your colleague’s understanding of the memo genre (an in-house document not usually made public; a hard copy of decisions that could serve as evidence of wrongdoing)—are part of our everyday expertise with written and spoken language. As speakers and listeners, writers and readers—in conversations, memos, telephone calls, lectures, meetings, whispered gossip, love letters, reports, stories, and other everyday discourse—modern subjects account for themselves and others in

language in complex ways. They account, for example, for their own and others' *needs* and those of others. "You" in this scenario account for your need for information and the need for discretion shared with your colleague, your own need to maintain "face" as a sociable person, and Peter's wife's "face" needs. Moreover, you account for the cognitive needs of others in communication: the amount of information overhearers need in order to guess what you are talking about, and elements of the environment or your personal knowledge of each other that you can assume are obvious to Peter and his wife. In so accounting, speakers and writers assess and manage self—the "lines" (Goffman 1955;1959) they feel they can take and feel are accepted by others—and sociality—the kinds of relations they mutually construct with others.

Such accounting underlies what theorists call "audience design," "face-work" (or, from some perspectives, "linguistic politeness"), and "genre"—ways of speaking and writing which, though world-making, are often tacit and unconscious. As Herbert Clark has shown in studies of audience design, speakers design their utterances for "participants," "overhearers," and "eavesdroppers," from moment to moment collaborating with others in interaction to manage understanding (Clark & Carlson, 1982). Doing so requires a constant evaluation of the "mutual knowledge" one is likely to share with one's interlocutors (Clark & Marshall, 1981), an ongoing "grounding" of communication that adjusts for the communicative situation and the medium (Clark & Brennan, 1991); these assessments influence linguistic pragmatic choices, such as when we use definite reference ("I'll meet you in front of **the** building") and "deictics" (words like "he" and "here" which rely on context for meaning). As studies of linguistic politeness have investigated, speakers also account for themselves and others in drawing

upon “politeness strategies,” for example, using “hedges” and the passive voice to avoid imposing on their interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987); their everyday discourse reveals competency in the self-presentation and repair strategies of what Erving Goffman (1955, 1959) has most usefully called “face-work,” the managing of one’s own and others’ “face” in social encounters. Speakers and writers competently account for self and others in a third way, in the *genres* of their personal and professional lives. In producing and responding to discourse types like the memo, the love letter, and the call for papers, they evaluate and act upon shared understandings of “rhetorical situations” (Bitzer, 1968), situations in which participants recognize a problem that can be solved with discourse, and of genres, or commonly recognized solutions to such problems.

*A/S/L? (Age/Sex/Location?): New Conditions for Accounting for Self and Other*

Since internet users first began to use the different technologies of online communication, they and their observers have wondered whether the language they used for self-presentation, for managing social interactions, and for solving problems would be adequate in the new communicative environments of the internet—how they could or should manage in the “virtual” coffee shop. Language conventions such as the acronym “A/S/L?” that have emerged to address this question draw attention to the ways that “computer mediated discourse,” or CMD, “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers” (Herring, 2001, 612), has challenged how we account for ourselves and others in language.

The questions posed in the heading above (“Age? Sex? Location?”) form an acronym used in chat rooms to find out who and where other chatters are. While in 2008

it might be hard to read the question without imagining the specter of child molesting predators looking for young girls, we can also read the acronym as a language convention soliciting the same kind of information that we might assess when looking around in the coffee shop lineup, where we could feel fairly confident that most people would assess age, sex, and location in ways similar to ourselves. Conventions like “A/S/L?” show the perception that the kinds of careful estimations we would make in social encounters and settings like the coffee shop conversation require new strategies in online settings like chat rooms. CMD has raised and continues to raise questions about managing subjectivity and sociality in language. These questions arise as we encounter new technological “affordances” (features of a technology which influence how it may be and is used) (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1988) which facilitate the speed, reproducibility, and apparent facelessness of CMD. They arise also when we are exposed to new kinds of social mixing—sometimes in new settings and sometimes in familiar settings suddenly open to new people. New social orders (globalization, cosmopolitanism, and postmodernism) that internet technologies appear to usher in make these questions more fraught as we need to deal not only with new technologies and new kinds of social mixing, but also with the possibility that local borders and loyalties may no longer be in effect in the same ways.

### *Objectives and Materials*

In this dissertation, I ask how we continue to manage self and sociality using CMD—how we manage the new conditions posed by digital communication, by the publicness and interactivity of much CMD, by the promise of new freedoms, by the ongoing introduction new ways of doing things and the development (in our own and in

others' circles) of new conventions. Susan Herring suggested already in 2004 that CMD might now be “slouching towards the ordinary” (2004, 26). If she is correct, then now more than ever it is important to observe the process by which ways accounting for self and other in CMD become “ordinary,” conventional and unquestioned, or debated, marginalized, and invisible. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, I examine the evolution of *audience design*, *face-work*, and *genre* in CMD. These three appear especially subject to change via internet technologies by virtue of new conditions like the anonymity, the “speed and reach” (Gurak, 2004), and the new “affordances” of CMD. As I show in subsequent chapters, self and social orders are at stake in audience design, face-work, genre, and other typified ways of using language that CMD promises—or threatens—to change. Theorists of audience design, face-work, and genre offer nuanced understandings of the relationship between these practices and self, sociality, and action—understandings which can inform claims from within other disciplines like social psychology and information science but which themselves can benefit from the opportunity to observe innovation and evolution in CMD.

In studying each of these, a fourth type of language practice—CMD “meta-discourse,” reflective discourse about CMD—can be seen informing online audience design, face-work, and genre in ways that need to be understood. Even preliminary observations of online language reveal an unprecedented flood and circulation of such discourse, which is often public and permanent. To unprecedented levels, people reflect publicly about language online—grammar, spelling, jargon, politeness, style, audience design, and genre—in a host of genres: reflective blog postings, conversation threads in newsgroups, statements about netiquette, policy statements, and comments displayed on

other online texts. Though metadiscourse may sometimes be public and permanent (as in a letter to the editor complaining about the newspaper's poor spelling), online metadiscourse is often public in that it can be accessed by anyone and often permanent in ways that metadiscursive comments in conversation would not be. We might dismiss this flood as just a temporary symptom of the kind of adjustment that scholars (Baron, 2000) have pointed out always occurs when new communications technologies emerge. But to do so, occurring as it does in the midst of ongoing changes to how we think about communicative environments, processes, and conventions, would be to throw away a chance to see how modern, local subjects negotiate change. Emerging metadiscourse can be examined in relation to metadiscourse from periods before this one, particularly from times also faced with change. This approach allows us to proceed more cautiously in making conclusions about CMD and self, sociality, and action, observing what may be truly new and what a reproduction of older modes of self and sociality. It also allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the operations of metadiscourse itself: what functions does such talk serve, and for whom? Can metadiscourse function differently because of new conditions—its publicness, its interactivity, its pervasiveness, the ease with which it is “published” and digitally reproduced, the permanent traces it leaves online?

These developments, finally, draw attention to—and cannot be understood outside of—complex questions about the nature and reproduction of *locality*. As I show in chapters discussing “netiquette” (or “internet etiquette”), newspaper coverage of new technologies, blogs by marginalized writers, and electronic petitioning, in order to understand audience design, face-work and genre in CMD we need to address each of these as both producing and produced by “local subjects” (Appadurai, 1996). Doing so,

we may recognize and better understand how speakers and writers encountering CMD and metadiscourse must negotiate different kinds of locality: from the “local” as traditionally understood (the geophysical local—one’s neighbourhood or town—or the geopolitical) to localities associated with “online culture.”

I draw in each chapter, therefore, on materials which publicly circulate claims or assumptions about evolving language practices and their impact on self and sociality. The discourse and metadiscourse examined in these chapters issue from and circulate amongst diverse contexts—from different national contexts, different “places” online (such as the “blogosphere”<sup>1</sup>), and different institutions and professions. All is generated from a sense of the newness of CMD.

In the first two chapters, these materials include newspaper and television reports (both offline and online), metadiscourse from popular culture (in the form of metaphors, jokes, and narratives), and prescriptive literature (netiquette literature). I use “metadiscourse” in its most basic sense, to mean discourse about discourse, rather than in the more specific sense used in linguistic pragmatics. Such texts are of the order of those studied by Deborah Cameron (1995, 2000), Milroy and Milroy (1985), and others when they study people’s deep investment in matters of language. Cameron describes as “verbal hygiene” the variety of attempts—from spelling reform to the teaching of “active listening” within corporate culture workshops—to control language (1995). James and Lesley Milroy (1985) have documented the importance of metadiscourse to keeping alive the ideology of standard English. Central to reproducing an ideology of a “standard” language, one which is stabilized, codified, and can be used to measure “nonstandard”

---

<sup>1</sup> A term used by bloggers referring to the collection of blogs online and the ways they are connected, often implying a community of bloggers.

usage, is what the Milroys call "complaints," or metadiscourse about corrupted or unclear uses of language. Bourdieu offers a similar view of the role of such discourse: "the legitimate language is a semi-artificial language which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction" (1989, 60). Such studies, and the work of others who study ideologies of "Standard English" (Crowley, 1989; Cheshire, 1999; Watts, 2000) have already shown the importance of examining how and why people talk about language.

In Chapters Three and Four, I turn to two "online" genres—the "homeless blog" and the "e-petition"—that promise new opportunities both for selfhood and social action. Focusing on these genres and the metadiscourse about them allows me to examine my central questions in relation to an especially enduring and generative discourse about self and sociality—the discourse promising that CMD can enhance citizenship, democracy, and the public sphere. Because homeless blogs and electronic petitions circulate both locally and translocally, and are informed by communities both rooted in the geophysical and rooted in the relational webs of cyberspace, they offer an opportunity to observe how internet users define local contexts, positioning themselves, their utterances, and the utterances of others in relationship to multiple contexts. In the process, civic discourse online helps to theorize the power of "local knowledge" about subjects and situations; hence it offers a way to meaningfully examine the possibilities for new kinds of subjectivity (Does the internet enable new subject positions? Who is able to take on new subject positions via CMD, and what kinds of constraints do they face?) and sociality (Can the internet bring about a new public sphere, and what might that look like?).

As part of this investigation of how local subjects participate in and construct knowledge and practices local to multiple localities, I argue, it is important to pay special attention to the geopolitical local and the local of the nation as “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991); these localities inform audience design, face-work, and genre in significant ways that have not been fully addressed by theories of mediated communication. Therefore, while this dissertation is not solely about Canadian use of CMD, I devote considerable attention to Canadian materials and Canadian contexts. I do so not only because we need to theorize the role of the geopolitical locality and imagined community in the questions I raise in this dissertation, but because these contexts and materials have received relatively little attention compared with other national contexts; much research emerges from the American context, or as a counterpoint to “Western” research, in which scholars treat American studies as adequate representations of internet use in the West.

In this first chapter, I identify the discourses of self and sociality circulating in the findings and theories of scholarship within “Internet Studies.” These discourses, as I take up in Chapters Three and Four, in turn feed discourses of online action; especially generative and enduring amongst these are beliefs that CMD can foster democracy, citizenship, activism, and the public sphere. Surveying such discourses, I identify underlying assumptions they make about language, assumptions that need to be examined and tested. Turning to metadiscourse produced by internet users, I identify ways that users themselves circulate similar beliefs about the connection between changes to language and changes to self and sociality. As I show in subsequent chapters, the perception of such changes inspires new practices and further metadiscourse—tools for

shaping possibilities for self, sociality and action online. I conclude this chapter by taking up an instance of metadiscourse about CMD from a moment when change seemed acute; I turn to a news story produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1993, when Canadians were first being exposed to online communication in significant numbers, and now featured in the CBC Digital Archives to showcase how far Canadian expertise with Internet use has changed. Analysis of this discourse identifies complex and multiple localities at play in how we use, monitor, evaluate and regulate CMD, and highlights the need to ask about how users manage self and sociality in these multiple localities.

*Part One: Scholarly and Folk Explanations of CMD, Identity, and Community*

*Critical Perspectives on the Online Subject*

Scholarship on self and subjectivity online draws attention to popular and scholarly investment in discourses of online identity, scholarship that in turn feeds metadiscourse about CMD, particularly about how to manage and regulate language. One proposal, issuing in particular from social psychology, is that anonymous communication in the absence of face-to-face contact, and the heightened interactivity of digital writing (as compared with writing in other media) allow subjects online to become untethered from their “real-life” identities—for good or ill. One such perspective on the anonymity and interactivity of CMD, for example, suggests that subjects can be more *authentically* themselves because they can escape the constraints imposed in “real-life” by discrimination against their gender, race, sexuality, age, and nationality. Baym, in her survey of scholarship from this camp, sums up this perspective: “CMC’s reduced cues

sometimes allow us to be more true to our embodied selves than we can be in the flesh” (2006, 42).

Like internet users themselves, theorists have proposed that subjects may move beyond the constraints of their subject positions, not only by virtue of reduced cues, but by virtue of access to discourse perhaps barred to them offline. Historian Mark Poster, for instance, in “Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere?” (2001), suggests that subjects’ construction of their identities in “cyberspace,”

does connote a "democratization" of subject constitution because the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and are not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications. The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, film-making, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production. (184)<sup>2</sup>

Access to public "cultural acts," to "the apparatuses of cultural production," is here seen as enabling subjects to publicly take on subject positions that they would not otherwise be able to take. Moreover, Poster's emphasis that "the acts of discourse are *not limited to one-way address*" (184; emphasis mine) suggests that those who speak back to such acts will support those subjects' acts of cultural production and the "subject constitution" that is theoretically enabled. The ““democratization”” of subject constitution" is central to the positive impact that internet technologies are seen as having on the public sphere. Claims about the homepage and the blog as places of self-expression from both scholars (for

---

<sup>2</sup> Poster originally articulates this position in a 1997 chapter "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere."

example, Wynn & Katz, 1998; Miller & Shepherd, 2004)) and online rhetors appear to support this possibility for the "'democratization" of subject constitution"—particularly with the interactivity of blogs and blog comments that allows writers to move beyond “one-way address” (Poster, 2001, 184) .

Marginalized subjects, others propose, may be empowered, and empower others, by being given a “voice” online (Brouwer, 2006; Shields Koch & Schockman, 1998; 2003; Mitra, 2001). Like Poster's predictions about people newly able to claim identities for themselves online, the discourse of voice is premised on the assumption that communication technologies provide chances for people to speak publicly in new ways. The internet, it suggests, provides agency not by giving access to new subject positions but by allowing existing subjects to become agents by speaking. These agents are those waiting to get a chance to speak, or those who speak but are not heard. As with beliefs that internet users can take on new subject positions, this belief in subjects becoming agents through access to technologies of “voice” is expressed in both scholarly and folk discourse. Formerly homeless and newly literate blogger James McCoy, for instance, articulates this optimism about “voice” in his public blog *Jamie's Big Voice*, whose blog banner reads “A voice battling for homeless people.” McCoy finds his own voice and feels that he is able to give voices to others: “I like giving homeless people a voice. Which they have never had and that's what my blog is all about. Listening to the people that matter” (2005a). The metadiscourse of internet users like McCoy, and the organizations that invited McCoy to set up his blog, monitoring its progress and offering

assistance,<sup>3</sup> circulates the belief that it is worthwhile for individuals and organizations to invest in new discourse genres, such as blogs, and the contributions they believe that such discourse can make toward fostering citizenship and public sphere discourse.

Another critical perspective on subjectivity in cyberspace comes from those who see the internet and computers more generally as contributing to a multiplication and fragmentation of identity. Psychologist Sherri Turkle articulates this most famously in *Life on the Screen* (1995), her study of role play in online environments, in which she argues that:

technology is bringing a set of ideas associated with postmodernism—in this case, ideas about the instability of meanings and the lack of universal and knowable truths—into everyday life. ... through experiences with computers, people come to a certain understanding of postmodernism and to recognize its ability to usefully capture certain aspects of their own experience, both online and off. (18)

That is, it is not only psychologists and theorists who perceive a multiplication and fragmentation of identity, but users themselves. One of Turkle's subjects describes his experience of this phenomenon with a remark about what he calls "RL," a common acronym online for "real life": "'RL is just one more window...and it's not usually my best one'" (1995, 13).

Some more recent scholarship has moved away from these positions, arguing that the online self is constructed in negotiation with others (hence not unitary and essential), and is not a function of pure creative control. In a study of webpages, Wynn and Katz, for

---

<sup>3</sup> McCoy's venture into blogging was initiated and supported by two British societies: Crisis, a society aimed at helping homeless people, and the Hansard Society, a society that tries to encourage public participation in politics and foster parliamentary democracy (*Weblogs*, 2005).

example, criticize postmodern views of identity, including Turkle's, that they see being taken up wholesale in computer circles. Wynn and Katz

take issue with idea that the self is discontinuous and a creation of the individual, under the control of that individual or else conversely controlled as a political unit. These latter premises are essential to the notion that selfhood can be changed in nature by moving to an allegedly anonymous electronic medium. (1997, 301)

Rather, drawing on Goffman, they suggest that selfhood is a product of "self-presentation," where people pay attention to "status cues." Online, they argue, people pay *more* attention to status cues because there is less information available about other people. Also drawing on Goffman, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006), in a study of "self-presentation" on online dating sites, similarly note that users pay special attention to "subtle, almost minute cues in others' presentational messages" such as spelling, "and often seemed to take the same degree of care when crafting their own messages" while they sought a balance between authenticity and attractiveness. Their observations suggest that self-presentation online is neither a matter of presenting the authentic, essential self nor of free play and fabrication.

### *Critical Perspectives on Sociality Online*

A robust body of scholarship also emerged in the 1990s examining what happens to sociality in CMD. One question concerned, again, the effects of anonymity: how would people treat others when they could hide behind pseudonyms? Pursuing similar questions, scholars asked how people would behave toward others in conditions of increased interactivity, particularly when interactivity was coupled with the ability to communicate anonymously and quickly and in the absence of face-to-face contact. Many

concluded that anonymity (or pseudonymity) subjected sociality to increased “violence” and “hostility.” In his study of “flaming,” for example, William Millard characterized flaming as “a form of personal violence arising largely from the peculiar conditions of online writing” (145); Mark Dery (1993), in his study of flaming, placed blame in two places: on “the wraithlike nature of electronic communication” (559), and on the absence of non-verbal cues, or paralanguage, leading to misinterpretations of email/posts and resulting in umbrage and lashing out. Selfe and Meyer (1991), in an early study of “online conferences,” claimed that “[f]laming’—heated, emotional, sometimes anonymous, venting by participants—is a common, if not universal, feature of computer-based conferences” (170), and suggested that depersonalization from anonymity and weak social feedback might be responsible.<sup>4</sup>

Studies of the effects of reduced “communication bandwidth”<sup>5</sup> made similar conclusions about anti-social behaviours. As Watt, Lea, and Spears (2002) point out in their review of social psychology literature, face-to-face communication is considered the ideal; likewise, deindividuation is a less than ideal state, one “in which reduced self-consciousness had weakened social controls such as guilt, shame, and fear that would normally inhibit anti-social behaviour” (66). Observations like these flow between scholarly studies of CMD and folk commentary on CMD. As I show in Chapter Two, these same claims about hostility, flaming, misunderstandings, reduced cues, and anti-

---

<sup>4</sup> For more on “flaming,” see O’Sullivan & Flanagan 2003; Herring, 1994; Mabry, 1997; Millard, 1997; Taskanen, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Watt, Lea and Spears note that social psychology takes the concept of communication bandwidth from engineering, defining it as “the relative information-carrying capacity and efficiency of different communication channels.” They identify the concept as coming originally from “information theory: mathematical formulations of communication potentially applicable to any situation of information transfer, by humans or machines” (2002, 64).

social behaviour are asserted and repeated in netiquette discourse, often functioning to assert the values and expectations of those who produce or circulate netiquette discourse.

Other scholarship, conversely, has suggested that sociality is not radically transformed—that CMD allows for existing patterns in social relations to be reproduced. Watt, Lea, and Spears themselves suggest that normative behaviour (important for maintaining patterns of social relations) continues to be important. Studying the effects of the internet on group belonging, looking specifically at the effect of reduced social cues in online interactions, they point out that social psychology theories of CMD as more “egalitarian, democratic, and liberating” or “extreme, impersonal, and anti-social” (2002, 63) than face-to-face interaction,

rest on the common assumption that a lack of interpersonal cues in text-based CMC creates interactions that are less socially defined, constrained, and regulated—in short, less social than face-to-face interactions. (64)

Their laboratory experiments, however, lead them to conclude that in fact “the reduction in social cues and relative anonymity provided by most internet communications are more likely to reinforce socially normative behaviour rather than undermine it” (64).

Studies of CMD, particularly genre, note that discourse which seems new has roots in older practices; in identifying the reproduction of older practices, such findings therefore suggest that the structures and social relations associated with those practices may be reproduced online, and that online sociality may not be radically different from offline sociality. For example, Mabry, in his study of flaming, suggests that flaming—a mode of interaction considered shocking and novel to some—has “prototypes” in “the broadside, the pamphlet, even theses nailed to a door” and “private correspondence”

(1997, 146). As Laurie McNeil points out, and I discuss in Chapter Three, many see the blog as a new form of the diary; Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004), in a study of metadiscourse about blogs in newspapers, argue that the association of diary blogs with teenage girls reproduces sexist underpinnings of social relations. Many others likewise suggest “offline” roots for online writing, particularly for two kinds of widely popular writing online: blogging (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004) and news genres (Watters & Shepherd, 1997; Erikson & Ihlstrum, 2000; Lewis, 2003; Boczkowski, 2004). As I discuss in Chapter Three and Four, folk metadiscourse echoes these scholarly approaches: while some asserts the newness of online writing, other metadiscourse about online genres questions or rejects possibilities for newness by asserting that online writing merely reproduces genres (and the structures and social relations associated with them) familiar from “offline” life.

Finally, another group of investigations, also echoed in folk commentary both online and off, has asked about the kinds and strength of connections people can make with others online. Studies of “community” have argued that CMD undermines connections with “real life” communities (Doheny-Farina, 1996), that it fosters online communities drawn together across geographical borders by shared interests (Fernback, 1998; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), and that online communities and environments develop their own discourse norms and ways of self-regulating (Baym, 1994; Cherny, 1999; Fox & Roberts, 1999).

### *Questioning Assumptions about Language*

Not only can these imagined internet users take on new identities, experience self more fully, or find connection with others in new ways, they appear able to act in the world in ways if not new then novel, if not unimaginable then at least unprecedented. Users can, for instance, network, educate, learn, protest, have sex, create art and theatre, bully, stalk, and terrorize via CMD—we express the novelty of these online acts with prefixes like “e-“ and “cyber”: “cyberactivism,” “cybersex,” “cyberterrorism.” As I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, beliefs about new opportunities for subjectivity, sociality, and action in the world come together in discourses of democracy and the public sphere.

Proposals about subjectivity online, and hence about sociality and action, however, rest on beliefs about language that have been questioned and need to be further questioned. One powerful set of assumptions is about freedom from or access to recognizable ways of talking and writing. Proponents of freedom from face-to-face constraints and of democratic subject constitution often assume that subjects online will not be recognized by the ways they talk and write—verbal cues will not give one away in the same ways as appearance, tone of voice, and so on. Alternatively, proponents assume that internet users, claiming new identities or pretending to be someone they are not, can learn or “put on” *others’* lexicons, registers, politeness strategies, and genres—either as a kind of disguise or in an identity “makeover.”

### *Recognizing the Subject Under the Pseudonym*

The first perspective, that subjects online will not be recognized by the ways they talk and write, drew early criticism. Studies of gendered language have asked, for

example, if the option for pseudonyms encourages or allows women to overcome power imbalances caused by gender. Selfe and Meyer (1991), in an early study of students in online conferences, concluded that dominating behaviour and conversation styles associated with gender were not mitigated by students' option of taking pseudonyms. A later study of gender and pseudonym use in students' communication in online conferencing (Jaffe, Lee, Huang & Oshagan, 1999) shows how communities evolve new ways of producing and recognizing difference in language. In that study, women took pseudonyms more than men and used more stereotypically female language features such as references to self: one implication of the study is that gender can be recognized both by older language practices associated with a gender (such as references to self) and new ones that have emerged in response to CMD (such as their male students' tendency to use male names and female students' tendency to take pseudonyms.)

Others, such as Herring in "Posting in a Different Voice: Gender and Ethics in Computer-Mediated Communication" (1999), have in fact argued not only that gendered language styles continue to be important online but that they reinforce patterns of domination based on gender. Making recommendations for how we regulate online language through "netiquette" rules, Herring concludes

the picture that emerges is one in which masculine norms of interaction constitute the default, the exception being in a few women-centered groups. These results not only support the claim that there are different value systems preferentially associated with male and female users, but further reveal gender bias in netiquette guidelines. (260)

These studies of “gendered” language—regardless of one’s stance on the issue of gendered language itself—demonstrate that internet users are in fact “recognizing” others by virtue of shared knowledge of local language conventions associated with subject positions like “woman” and “man.” As I show in subsequent chapters, Goffman’s theory of “face-work” (1955; 1959) offers a way to further understand the dynamics of recognition (for example, users’ recognition of stereotypical verbal markers seen in studies such as those of gendered language online).

### *Putting on Others’ Speech*

The second possibility, that others’ registers, lexicons, politeness strategies, and genres can be learned or “put on” online, has been less critiqued and is, in fact, more pervasive with perhaps greater implications. Theories of genre caution that not everyone can produce the “right” kinds of discourse—an important point for studies in other disciplines, such as studies of “e-democracy” and “e-government,” to remember. To remain with the example of gender, a person barred in one locality by gender stereotypes from a position like “engineering expert” could not, we imagine, publish an encyclopedia entry on “reinforcing steel in concrete,” for the encyclopedia entry is a genre open only to ratified experts. If we believe that rhetors can take up the genres of the others they would like to be recognized as, then we must conclude that such a user online could aspire to produce such an article, perhaps via an encyclopedia like “Wikipedia,” that would be used by others and recognized as a legitimate instance of an encyclopedia article; producing such an article, and having it recognized and used by others, would a) confirm her as expert, and b) help to solve a knowledge deficit about reinforcing steel.

However, rhetorical theories of genre suggest that discourse not perceived as a “fitting” response—not recognized as the right “constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1979, 18)—may fail to perform its desired social action. In the scenario I have drawn here, we can imagine that while some would accept the Wikipedia article as a legitimate expression of expertise, and a legitimate contribution to a knowledge deficit, other readers would dismiss it for the very reason our anonymous author could use it in the first place: it does not use the same controls over its content (and its contributors) as a print encyclopedia. In Anne Freedman’s terms, such discourse may fail to arrange for desired “uptakes” (2002). Mimicking the formal characteristics of a genre—for example, those of a business letter—does not mean it will be recognized as the right constellation. We can see it ourselves in our responses to overly formal and farfetched “business” emails (often from writers claiming to be located in Nigeria) that can be easily recognized as “phishing” (requests based on dishonest premises for private information that can be used for identity theft or bank fraud) rather than authentic emails.

Importantly, rhetors may not have access to genres associated with the subject positions they strive to take on. As Freedman and Medway note in their early call for studies of genre and power,

Outsiders...can be repelled with generic defences from positions of privilege. Here the decisive factor may be the difficulty and inaccessibility of some genres, and particularly the arcane tacit rules and background knowledge which inform some of them. (1994, 14)

Proponents of the discourse of “voice” like Mitra and Watts need also heed this caution. The assumption that being able to publish something on a blog or newsgroup allows people to feel their words can accomplish something, and that others will respond in ways that confirm the power of such “voices,” does not account for the fact that subjects may not have access to the kinds of genres that will be listened to—such as genres normally reserved for “experts” or those used for addressing publics.

Finally, the discourse of empowerment through information makes assumptions about how readers and listeners understand others’ discourse: it assumes that if information is available online, users will be able to find it, recognize it as information, understand it, and find it relevant. Studies from Information Science and from within professional fields like medicine (concerned with how patients might access and understand medical information online) have offered critiques of this assumption. Bromme, Jucks, and Runde (2005), for example, turn to linguistic pragmatic theories of the role of “copresence” in designing implicatures to examine “Barriers and Biases in Computer-Mediated-Expert-Layperson-Communication.” They examine how medical experts sometimes overestimate how much information lay people are able to infer from pictures or tables that they themselves understand well. Their findings, “that experts might suffer from an illusion of evidence when communicating with laypersons in computer-mediated settings” (they might expect laypersons to be able to perceive more information than is the case) (90), suggest that optimistic discourse about “information” circulating amongst internet users, governments, organizations, and scholars needs to consider how audience design is constrained by the tacit knowledge and assumptions of different groups.

*New Subjects in Public Metadiscourse (On the Internet, No one (Everyone) Knows  
You're a Dog)*

Like the kinds of scholarship I have surveyed here, internet users' metadiscourse offers proposals about CMD, the self, and sociality. It is not enough to survey scholarly perspectives on these questions because researchers take up folk commentary as evidence of language change just as internet users turn to the "expert knowledge" of researchers. This dynamic bears out Giddens' argument that "[s]ociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process" (14-15; emphasis in original). Informed by both scholarly and folk metadiscourse about the new conditions of communication, new practices emerge—new instances of language regulation (like AOL's filtering of email in order to censor profanity), new conventions (like the emoticons "needed" to overcome the lack of paralinguistic cues), and new genres (like the FAQ and the social networking profile). Observing such practices, scholarly commentary and folk wisdom speculate on their effects—speculation which, by virtue of our ability to access, reproduce, and circulate digital text, continues to propel further metadiscourse and the production of new practices.

Tracing folk metadiscourse about identity online over time reveals the mutually-informative relationship between *ideas* circulating in metadiscourse and the evolution of shared knowledge of discourse conventions and types. When internet users go online and write blog postings, questions and advice on bulletin boards and forums, encyclopedia articles on Wikipedia, and email on listservs, who do they think CMD allows them to be? What do they feel such discourse can or should do for their selves and the selves of

others? Narratives of online identity reveal, and are modified to reflect, beliefs about CMD's implications for identity and about discourse conventions and types.

We can trace this in the circulation and creative adaptations over the past fifteen years of a popular joke, Peter Steiner's famous (now cliché) *New Yorker* comic of an internet-using dog. Published in the *New Yorker* in 1993 and widely reproduced online since then, the comic features a dog typing on a computer keyboard and explaining to another dog beside him, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." This comic plays on two views of identity: one of the self as unitary and autonomous (a dog is a dog, even on the internet), one of the self as potentially multiple and performative. The consequences of CMD's anonymity, it suggests, depend on one's perspective on identity. If one espouses a view of identity as unitary and autonomous, the caption suggests that online, one can really be "oneself" free from the constraints of face-to-face contact. On the other hand, if one espouses the view that one can inhabit multiple selves (one's "real-life" self, and the selves that one can persuade others to accept), one can pretend to be someone whom one is not. Much of the humour in this comic, I would argue, comes from the contrast between the utopianism of the first interpretation and the dangers of the second. If we think sympathetically of the happy dog, we align ourselves with those who seek to escape prejudice and be judged according to criteria different from those by which we are judged in face-to-face contact. On the other hand, we can interpret "dog" as slang for "ugly woman" or for "philandering man," the comic then becoming a warning to those who engage in Internet dating or the seedier world of online sex—and therefore a warning to account for others differently in CMD than in other kinds of speech and writing.

In its circulation both offline and online, the image of the anonymous internet-using dog becomes a cultural shorthand for the freedom and/or danger of anonymous communication, an image and phrase passed around to express users' view of the relationship between self and CMD and to solicit discussion on that relationship. Offline the phrase and the quandary found resonance in an off-Broadway play *Nobody Knows I'm a Dog* (Perkins, 2000) about lonely newsgroup participants misrepresenting themselves.<sup>6</sup> As Perkins describes his play, it rejects the possibility of the self and multiple and performative: "This morality tale explores the notion that though people try to manufacture fantasy personas in cyberspace, their real personality eventually comes through" (Perkins, 2003). A reflection in the *New York Times* (Web edition) about the phrase coined by Steiner reports the comic as *New Yorker's* most reproduced, reporting in 2000 that "The Google.com search engine produces more than 103,000 potential matches. The saying is often cited as "that old phrase" or "the adage"" (Fleishman). Spinoffs of the phrase pointed out in a thread (Pinkfreud-ga, 2003) about the origin of the phrase include "On the internet, no one knows you're a frog," "On the internet, no one knows you're a fraud," "On the internet, no one knows you're a god," and "On the internet, no one knows you're a dog in drag."

This comic's continued circulation of playful revisions of the image and slogan shows that perspectives on identity and anonymity in CMD evolve along with shared knowledge of conventions for managing identity online. The image of the internet-using "dog" further evolved particularly in response to online genres associated with the care or active construction of the self. Michael Kinsley offers one such playful revision, for

---

<sup>6</sup> First produced in 1996, *Nobody Knows I'm a Dog* was subsequently produced across the United States, in Canada, Taiwan, Bulgaria, and the United Arab Emirates (Perkins, 2003).

example, in his 2006 article in *Slate* (a popular online magazine) reporting on the growing popularity of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, where “profiles” list people’s real names and are carefully engineered to *reveal* key facts about one’s job, hobbies, and so on. Kinsey quips:

On the Internet, not only does everybody know that you're a dog. Everybody knows what kind of dog, how old, your taste in collars, your favorite dog food recipe, and so on. (Kinsley, Nov. 27, 2006)

Shared knowledge of the nature and purpose of MySpace and Facebook includes the knowledge that the self is clearly constructed and multiple—a product of careful self-display in a social network—rather than unitary and autonomous. Though fears about false identities may linger, Kinsey’s joke shows that for knowledgeable users of these sites, anonymity is no longer the prime factor in managing self in CMD. Audience design, face, and genre are now deeply informed by CMD’s capacity for *publicizing* the self.

Weblogging, or blogging, too, has given rise to shared understandings of identity online that inform how bloggers account for themselves and others via audience design, face-work, and genre. Blogging emerged in 1999 with the introduction of free, easy-to-use ‘blogging’ software applications like *Blogger* and *Edit This Page*; in subsequent years, blogging’s popularity snowballed, in part because it allowed a combination of anonymity and self-display. For many, blogging represented a recognizable way to *foster* “self” —as Miller and Shepherd (2004) put it, an opportunity for “self-cultivation and validation.” Another *New Yorker* comic also featuring an internet-using dog emerges in 2005, gesturing to old concerns in its reminder of the internet-using dog but pointing to

how concerns about identity has changed in response to such shared understandings of CMD. This time a dog explains to a friend, “I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking” (Gregory, 2005). The comic parodies bloggers’ belief that they can construct a self online who can do or be more than they can offline (who can offer more than “pointless, incessant barking”). The reasons for the dog’s abandonment of his blog, however, are ambiguous. If the comic is a jibe at the large numbers of bloggers who abandon their blogs, or who have nothing interesting to say, mockery is directed toward the inadequacy of bloggers themselves. If a comment on the futility of expecting one’s discourse to be heard and responded to (that is, the futility of offering something other than “pointless, incessant barking,” mockery is directed toward something more serious: the potential failure of CMD to give a voice to marginalized users. Like Steiner’s comic, this one is passed around, particularly in the “blogosphere” as bloggers themselves reflect, metadiscursively, on what writing on the internet does for them and others.

Blogging conventions that have emerged to deal with anonymous CMD also demonstrate how discourse practices online both respond to and produce beliefs about identity, and how folk metadiscourse helps to consolidate those beliefs and language conventions. We can see this in a 2006 uptake in the blogosphere of the phrase “No one knows you’re a dog.” An *LA Times* journalist was caught posting comments on his own blog under a false name and publicly criticized by other journalists for “sock puppeting,” a term which has emerged to describe posting comments under one’s own name and then posting again under an alias. Another blogger, reporting on this debacle, quips in a remark subsequently widely quoted online: “As the famous saying goes, on the internet,

no one knows you're a dog. However - they will **probably figure it out** if you are a horse's ass" (Maguire, 20 April, 2006). The anonymous poster is revealed as what he "really" is—in this case, not a dog but a horse's ass. The joke teaches that identity is "real," something that might be masked temporarily by CMD's anonymity but that will ultimately be revealed by the discourse practices of the author. Ultimately, however, it teaches that identity (as "sock puppeteer" and "horse's ass") is the product of discursive norms that have emerged to manage anonymity in CMD. In this example, Maguire's metadiscursive blog post about sock puppeting reminds his readers that identity, whether one remains anonymous or not, can be recognized by virtue of one's acceptance or rejection of norms agreed upon in the blogosphere.

*Part Two: When Thou Enter a City Abide by its Customs: Metadiscourse and the Local*

In their engagements with the kinds of possibilities surveyed above, internet users and observers produce metadiscourse which points strongly to the role of locality in shaping these possibilities. It tells us, first, that language in the Internet "city" described in the epigraphs is not like language in our "hometowns." Thurlow (2006), in a study of metadiscourse in news articles about CMD and text messaging, notes powerful themes that often exaggerate the differences between online and offline communication, often coloured with worry, even panic. Metadiscourse about CMD suggests not only that language is different online, but that that we are required to become aware of what is "understood" beyond the local contexts with which we are familiar—whether the local coffee shop, the local of the neighbourhood, the local in which we share an understanding of office politics and office genres, the local in which we mutually understand the

conversational responsibilities of polite people toward colleagues and their wives, and so on. Like travelers, we are told, we need to become aware of and decide how to respond to knowledge that is local to other settings, communities, even technologies themselves. As Patrick Crispen and those who reproduce his “Internet Roadmap” counsel: “When thou enter a city abide by its customs” (2006).

But the simplicity of this advice about netiquette is deceiving; the injunction raises more questions than it answers. Are the city limits defined by the technology, an online community, the nationality of the users one interacts with? Whose city is this, and is it the same all the time? Are the others we encounter visitors or residents, and are our responsibilities the same to all? Will the “city” be different tomorrow, and how much can we be expected to keep up? In fact, metadiscourse sometimes laments that problems arise because interlocutors misrecognize or disagree about such questions—about “where” they are, what others know, and who they are in relation to others. In other words, metadiscourse points to ideological investments in local understandings of audience design, facework, and genre. For instance, as Barbara Danet (2001) and others (Baron, 2002, 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) have noted, teachers are sometimes flummoxed or worse by emails sent by students; they complain of emails using expressions they do not understand (like “imho,” or “in my humble opinion”), lacking a greeting or with an overly informal greeting (“hey chris”), showing less regard for capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, and generally not meeting their expectations of communication between students and professors and of communication for recognizable purposes such as requesting extensions, asking favours, and so on. Such complaints about student emails

(and the metadiscourse generated in response, such as chapters on email in academic writing textbooks) draw attention to multiple sources of potential conflict over CMD.

In confusion over lexical change (for example, the emergence of new acronyms like “imho”), we see a challenge for audience design (can/should students assume that professors use the new lexicon of “Internet culture,” since the Internet has been widely adopted by the academic community? Should professors conclude that the use of such acronyms signals an assumption of their computer literacy, or students’ lack of respect?). In teachers’ complaints of nonstandard capitalization and punctuation, we see fears that the “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991) associated with one’s mastery of “Standard English” spelling and grammar might not have the same currency in the new environments of the internet. We see also, in these unorthodox emails from students, changes to the constellation of elements which make up genres like the “request for extension” and on which we rely to accomplish “social action” (Miller, 1984). This is a challenge not only because we rely on genres to do work, but also because through the learning, recognition and reproduction of such constellations, genre theory suggests, communities and their values are reproduced.

### *Ordinary Human Fellowship*

Much is at stake, then, in understanding local expectations about self and sociality produced by language conventions and types. Given that this is so, it is not surprising that metadiscourse monitors and guides how we recognize “where” we are online. Turning to the epigraph for this chapter—from which its title is taken—helps to identify the range of locations to which subjects may index social roles and language practices. It shows that the questions implied above (Is language there the same as here? What are our

responsibilities for becoming aware of what is “understood” beyond the local contexts with which we are familiar? What happens when others’ estimation of the context of our interaction is different from ours?) may be informed by different and potentially competing kinds of localities.

In 1993, two years after the introduction of Gopher<sup>7</sup> and the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1991 began to bring computer-mediated discourse into the everyday lives of more and more people, Canada’s national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), aired a television news story introducing Canadians to “a computer network called ‘Internet,’” a story implying that while only some Canadians would be familiar with this network, others could expect to encounter it soon. News anchor Peter Mansbridge described Internet users in the story as “they,” implying that the majority of listeners imagined would be new to the Internet; both Mansbridge and reporter Bill Cameron were careful to describe “Internet” in simple terms as if listeners would most likely be new to the technologies. But Cameron also instructed listeners on how to participate in “Internet,” telling them “You need a computer and a phone,” implying that Canadians were primed to join in if they had not already. This address reminds us of the geopolitical and geophysical context of Canadian internet use: internet use is *local* in the ways it is constrained by the resources of a place—the numbers of computers available, and their locations; electricity and bandwidth resources; education, and so on. Metadiscourse here is local in the same way: produced with the resources of a national broadcaster. As I discuss particularly in Chapter Four, geophysical and geopolitical locality can constrain CMD in other ways as well.

---

<sup>7</sup>Gopher was “a distributed document search and retrieval network protocol designed for the Internet” (Wikipedia) that introduced many people to email. It functioned similarly to the WWW.

The airing and viewing of this story also shows another sense in which CMD and metadiscourse are local, by reminding us of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991), where national identity is produced in citizens’ “simultaneous” consumption of media, including media images of itself: internet use is *local* also because members of such imagined communities encounter images of themselves as “Canadian internet users.” Critically, these are not only images of the self but also of other users; such metadiscourse gives us a way to recognize others from our locality as well as to know how we might be expected to act if we wanted to take a “line” as “Canadian.”

The local image drawn in this story also has implications beyond audience design. Canadians were also, this story suggested, poised on the edge of a new moment, one to which they needed carefully to attend. Soon to become active online, Canadians needed to understand the new conditions of online communication. More importantly, the story suggested that Canadians needed not only to understand but to shape those possibilities, by considering how Canadian values and practices would be relevant in the new environment of “Internet”—what role they would play as Canadians in the “revolution” it was ushering in. Most notably, for instance, they were invited to consider how they as Canadians ought to react to unregulated communication, and invited to side with Cameron’s implication that as “pure, clear, free,” unregulated communication was something that Canadians ought to find valuable and worth protecting. Moreover, in siding with this perspective on “pure, clear, free, unregulated communication,” they were further invited to consider that responses to online communication could be an occasion to assert Canadian difference from the United States (“*Here in Canada, nothing yet. Borders still count for something*”), that is, to reaffirm the border in the face of American

cultural imperialism and the globalization implied by the internet itself. In other words, this metadiscourse about CMD points to investments that early Canadian internet users were assumed or encouraged to have in the development of online language and sociality. Such an image of the local “Canadian internet user” could inform the discourse of those wanting to be recognized as “Canadian”—perhaps their embrace of non-standard spelling and punctuation, or their tolerant response to “flames.” Or it could inform how others interpret the online discourse of such a person (in linguistic pragmatic terms, could inform “implicature”).

To complicate matters further, at the same time as drawing attention to Canada as a geopolitical and relational locality, this instance of metadiscourse also points toward other localities—localities that we will encounter online. In describing how the internet is “a bit like human fellowship, but bigger and more precise,” playwright John Allen, interviewed in the story, describes how the internet provides new settings for new social gatherings. ““You can walk into a bar,”” explains Allen,

and decide that you want to have a conversation about, ah, football today, because you were just at a football game...and there might be two or three people who want to talk about football in the bar, but it would be very difficult to find them. In this world, there’s a table with a big sign on it saying “football”, and there’s about 150 or 1000 jocks from all around the world who want to talk about football. So you sit down, you say, “What do you think about the Raiders?” and 500 people answer you.

In the story of the table with a sign saying “football,” we glimpse another locality—a room full of people with a shared interest and knowledge of one topic but perhaps of little

else—an online community of football fans. Such a locality will have its own genres, registers, lexicon, expectations of face-work, and so on; audience design will be made easier by mutual knowledge of the shared interest, but more difficult by the diversity of members' backgrounds.

Finally, we learn, Internet users are not only Canadians but people “in rec rooms, offices, and classrooms”—that is, in local contexts defined by their field of activity; moreover, they're not only in different local fields of activity, but “*around the world* and “*across cultures and continents*.” This final example of metadiscourse, therefore, further highlights the challenge of audience, face-work, and genre in the “city” of the Internet—reminding us that even as we enter a city, we may not put down our memberships in other localities and the expectations that those invoke.

#### *Local Contexts of “Technology” and “Communication”*

These examples of metadiscourse show that critiquing assumptions about language underlying responses to CMD (at the level of scholarship but also of policy, regulation, education, and so on) is important, and that doing so requires theorizing the role of locality in the questions raised here.

Scholars *have* rightly criticized technologically deterministic claims about what technology *does to* people, suggesting that since technologies are socially constructed, they have locally variable profiles and effects; so, too, we need to rethink claims about what technology *does to* language. As Jonathan Sterne cautions in *Bourdieu, Technique And Technology* (2003),

Technologies are socially shaped along with their meanings, functions, and domains and use. Thus, they cannot come into existence simply to fill a pre-

existing role, since the role itself is co-created with the technology by its makers and users. (373)

That is, technologies are local constructions. Using the history of the record player as his example, Sterne makes the additional point that this socially-shaped role changes over time and is not static. Studies of CMD, therefore, need to bear in mind local constructions of technology (as enabling revolution, as transformative, and so on) as they intersect with local beliefs about language, subjects, social exigencies, and locality itself. These intersections have shaped and are shaping everyday discourse practices and their metadiscourse about those practices, hence shaping the possibilities for CMD's local effects on subjectivity and sociality.

Scholarship in Internet Studies has in recent years moved away from global analyses, studies of online communication calling for more local studies of language in context. Gurak puts it this way in her introduction to the 2004 edition of *Web Studies*,

Probably one of the most fundamental shifts in Internet studies at the dawn of the twenty-first century came in a move away from trying to generalize about all online behaviour to recognizing that, as the Internet became the domain of many, and as websites covered everything from the news to college courses to home recipes, it was not possible to say that online communication is *one thing* and one thing only. In other words, context is key. (Gurak, 2004, 28)

Studies taking up such calls investigate the “local” in both senses of the word that Hayles identifies in "The Politics of Chaos: Local Knowledge versus Global Theory" (1990) as part of a larger trend in scholarship toward locally-focussed scholarship.

In critical theory... "global" is understood to mean not only cultural systems considered as a whole but any theory that subsumes particular texts or phenomena into a universal explanation... Similarly, "local" connotes both a small subsection of a geopolitical area, such as the western coast of Brittany, and particular textual or cultural sites that resist assimilation into the generalizations of a universal theory. (209)

Although Hayles was writing in 1990, her description of the movement from global to local scholarship fairly characterizes newer studies of CMD which examine internet use in different localities (both geopolitical and purely relational) and which examine particular rather than global practices.

These more local analyses include studies of non-North American internet usage (Yoon, 2001; Hongladarum, 2001; Sundaram, 2000), whose experiences are inflected by culture, religion, economics, and geopolitics, and internet use in other languages (Schaap, 2005; Nishimura, 2003; de Oliveira, 2003). Yoon, for example, notes in her ethnographic study of young Korean Internet users that students and their parents reject the "use" and "information" or "learning" value of the Net which is often assumed in Western talk about the "Information Society." Rather, if the Internet has any "use" for them, she concludes, it lies in increasing their prestige and in enacting an alternative hierarchy wherein young people have authority over older generations. Korean internet users, she suggests, operate under the belief that "Internet users will be leaders of the 'Information Society' of the twenty-first century," a view of the Internet which invokes hierarchy, not the western discourses of "the commons" (Yoon, 2001, 252), the new public sphere, and so on. Yoon notes also how her subjects struggle with the challenges of a linguistic

market dominated by conditions inherited from a colonial past. Sandarum likewise emphasizes the importance of acknowledging local practices and of examining consequences of practices and knowledge circulating beyond the local; he calls for an approach that is sensitive to the situated character of knowledge-formations and cyberpractices in the Third World, where narratives of critique and fluidity in the West may have entirely different consequences when re-presented in a country like India. (2000, 290)

These studies alert us to the fact that borders may invoke alternate paradigms for the internet.

Local analyses also include studies of the “digital divide” (Norris, 2001; Warschauer; 2004, DiMaggio & Hargittai; 2001)—that is, analyses of how benefits of the internet might be unevenly distributed across populations, especially due to issues of access and education. The move to local analysis also includes studies which look more narrowly at the forms and functions of discourse in specific *communities* (that is, studies of the particular rather than the global). These include online communities, such as Steve Jones’ study of news reading and authoring in the soc.culture.yugoslavia Usenet group and Nancy Baym’s 1995 study of conventions in a soap opera fan newsgroup. Studies in the 1990s of “online community” began to raise questions about whether geophysical definitions of locality, and geophysical contexts, were sufficient for understanding such communities. Such studies of the local or “context” move us toward a more nuanced understanding of the internet’s role in this moment of modernity, but also raise questions about how internet users and researchers recognize, delimit, and manage “context,” or “locality.” What do we mean when we argue that something is a “local” practice? How

does the context provided by "Internet culture" influence how speakers/writers assess other speakers and other utterances? Are local contexts equally important to everyone, and would everyone define locality in analogous ways?

*Redefining "Local" in Studies of CMD*

Studying CMD and metadiscourse about CMD, I argue, it is most useful to think of the local as something produced—as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests—by “local knowledge” embedded in everyday practices. Appadurai, in *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, approaches locality from a nuanced perspective that allows us to move beyond geophysical definitions of the local, and to recognize how human competencies and knowledge are products of but also produce locality. Appadurai approaches “the persistent patterning of social life” (1996, 179) via questions about globalization, the breakdown of nationalism, (de)colonization, and locality—in which he implicates the internet and other digital communication. Appadurai’s description, which I adopt in this dissertation, stresses the relationality of locality. He writes:

I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts. (1996, 178)

Locality, as relational, is social.

Appadurai further proposes that locality is a product of “local knowledge.” “[S]pace and time,” he suggests, “are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action” (1996, 180),

that is, through local knowledge. He offers as examples of local knowledge naming ceremonies and circumcision, which *embody* locality, and house-building and garden-making, implicated in the *spatial* production of locality. Ways of marking seasonal change reveal aspects of the *spatiotemporal* production of locality.

Appadurai's approach complements other definitions of locality that recognize tacit knowledge informing relationships between subjects. Mike Featherstone in "Localism, Globalism, and Cultural Identity," for instance, describes locality this way:

A local culture may be a common set of work and kinship relationships which reinforce the practical, everyday lived culture which is sedimented into *taken-for-granted knowledge and beliefs*. (emphasis added) (1996, 52)

The sedimentation, the "taken-for-granted" (or tacit) nature of local knowledge and beliefs is "reinforce[d]" by relationships, or sociality.

Local knowledge in turn operates in part through producing "local subjects, actors who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbors, friends, and enemies" (1996, 180). Such local subjects not only are able to perform the actions through which locality is produced, but able to recognize and evaluate, in relation to the production of locality, moves which issue from other subjects. Language and self-presentation competencies and conventions in CMD, I argue, are kinds of local knowledge both produced by and producing local subjects. Several kinds of local knowledge are at work online: knowledge of subjects and their relations (of "woman," "man," "homeless person," "citizen"), of subjects and their "personal fronts," of subjects and their responsibilities to other interlocutors, of genres, and of the histories and purposes of metadiscourse.

### *Overview of Chapters*

In the chapters that follow, I turn to examinations of metadiscourse and discourse conventions around audience design, face-work, and genre, asking how CMD and metadiscourse are informed by the dynamics of local production.

In Chapter Two, ““Where is Here?” and “Know Where You Are”: The Problem of “Co-presence” Online,” I take up the question of audience design raised at the beginning of this chapter: how do we account for ourselves and others when we design and read online utterances? Beginning with the linguistic pragmatic theory of “relevance,” which examines how the kinds of choices we make in the coffee shop are functions of how we estimate “mutual cognitive environments” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 41), and other insights of pragmatics, I suggest that accounting for others online requires adjusting our understanding of “co-presence” online. Drawing on both “netiquette” literature and Canadian national newspaper reports of Canadian technology use, I show that metadiscourse “instructs” users on the need to account for new kinds of “copresence” in designing our utterances and draws attention to local influences on how we estimate what is mutually known to ourselves and others. Examining instances of audience design in online texts draws attention to a problem in estimating shared cognitive environments—the problem of mutually estimating the nature of one’s responsibilities to others in discursive encounters—that is especially subject to local knowledge. Bringing Goffman’s theory of “face-work” to online pragmatics suggests ways that metadiscourse produces local knowledge about audience design online.

In Chapter Three, “The Homeless Blog: Negotiating Local Consensus about Genre Innovation,” I bring Goffman’s observations about face-work in social encounters

to the observations of genre theory, in order to examine the possibility that through new opportunities for subjectivity and sociality, new opportunities for civic action emerge in CMD. Investigating the emergence and public reception of an instance of a new civic genre, the “homeless blog” (a weblog written by a homeless or formerly homeless person about homelessness), I observe that rhetors’ access to new opportunities for civic discourse is subject to public “meta-generic” discourse (Giltrow, 2002) in ways that genre theory needs to account for and that can inform possibilities for “e-democracy” and other such proposals. I suggest, first, that genres like the homeless blog (innovative, subject to public meta-genre, and disrupting expectations) are subject to local constraints in that their innovative discourse is often “recognized” in terms of older discourse types associated with local constructs of homeless subjects. Second, in introducing Goffman’s theory of face-work to new rhetorical theories of genre, I offer the concept of “working consensus” as a way to understand how public meta-genre may negotiate provisional, localized agreement about discursive action that transcends the boundaries of communities normally theorized in genre studies.

In Chapter Four, “Petitioning Canada Online: Genre Adaptation and Local Genre Systems,” I continue to examine possibilities for civic action by looking at another kind of civic genre, one which, like the homeless blog, promises to enhance citizenship. Unlike the homeless blog—a new genre—the electronic petition (or e-petition) is seen as an improvement, a “remediation” of an existing genre; that genre, the petition, has a long history and robust image and has a place within a well-established “genre system,” or group of “interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings” (Bazerman, 2002, 97). Like the homeless blog, the e-petition must account for meta-genre; this is not

the public meta-genre of readers and authors, however, but a) powerful meta-generic advice and regulations generated by a genre system and b) instructions generated by service providers who promise to improve the petitioning experience. The emergence of e-petitioning capabilities and rhetors' exposure to new genre practices from different localities, I argue, raises new questions about self, sociality, and action. Situating innovation in petitioning in historical contexts, examining the genre features and genre system of the public petition to the Canadian House of Commons, and analyzing authorial choices in a corpus of Canadian e-petitions, I conclude that tension between local genre knowledge, local systems, and the circulation of extra-local conventions constrains possibilities for new civic action.

In my final chapter, *Conclusion: Evolving Discourse Practices and the Local*, I ask what these chapters collectively tell us about locality and the evolution of metadiscourse. I suggest ways that the insights that emerge from studies of netiquette and other metadiscourse, the homeless blog, and electronic petitioning are relevant to studies of genre, audience design, and face-work "offline" as well as to other language practices and the effects of other communications technologies.

Chapter Two: “Where is Here?” and “Know Where You Are”:  
The Problem of “Co-presence” Online

Let people know where you are located. You could be anywhere in the world. For example, saying "Business is good here" without saying where "here" is.

Appraisal Today, “Netiquette and Smileys,” 2008

It's important to remember that, even though you can't see or hear them, **you are interacting with people**. Therefore, the common rules of basic human kindness still apply. People are not perfect. *They make mistakes and say strange things*. They may even, *intentionally or not, insult or offend others*. Please be as understanding and tolerant as you would in any face-to-face communication.

Patrick Crispin, “Lesson 7: Netiquette,” 1994  
(emphasis mine)

“It’s worldwide. The things you post on public discussion groups and newsgroups are available for the entire world to see. Even e-mail can’t be assumed to be totally private.

Turville, “Netiquette for educators,” 2001

*Introduction: Approaching the Problem of “Copresence”*

In Chapter One I asked you to imagine the face-work and linguistic pragmatic choices you would face if you ran into colleague “Peter” and his wife (who teaches French). I invited you to consider what kind of “implicatures” (Grice, 1975)—that is, meanings suggested or implied rather than stated directly—would be possible in such a situation, and what might happen if you estimated incorrectly. The kinds of evaluations you would make in such a situation would be based in part on your local knowledge of subjectivity and sociality: who your interlocutors were, who the people around you were, who you wanted to be recognized as, what you could all reasonably assess about

knowledge shared with those others, and what your responsibilities to each other were in light of these factors. In assessing and acting on this local knowledge in such situations, we design utterances for others in ways that call upon and reinforce social roles—like “colleague” and “wife”—and social relations.

CMD challenges our ability to act in these ways by changing the conditions of “copresence”: we cannot look around the coffee shop in the same way, noting the people, the décor, the sound of the espresso machine that might mask our discourse from overhearers. The problem of online “copresence”—the fact that online we do not share environments with our interlocutors in the same ways we do in face-to-face conversations like the one in the coffee shop—has been taken up under different names by many observers. User metadiscourse and studies of self and sociality online surveyed in Chapter One’s discussion of literature on “anonymity,” reduced cues, hostility and incivility (“flaming”), and possibilities for “online community” respond to the common, even doxic feeling that face-to-face communication is the ideal communicative situation. Such discourses suggest that *physical* copresence—being able to see and hear the same things in one’s environment—allows self and sociality to flourish in ways it cannot in the absence of physical copresence.

Studies of “audience design” from linguistic pragmatics observe that “physical copresence” is important—but also that it is not the only factor informing speakers’/listeners’ confidence in their ability to manage in the “coffee shop” and other settings. These studies account for the role of physical copresence in how utterances are designed and interpreted: in a face-to-face encounter, they have shown, competent speakers use physical copresence to estimate others’ “community memberships” (Clark

& Marshall, 1992, 36). Estimating the “mutual knowledge” or “common ground” shared with someone else might mean noticing how someone is dressed, how he carries himself, whether he swears, his facial expressions, and his accent. But pragmatics also demonstrates how there is another kind of “copresence” at work. Interlocutors have to estimate further, since it is not enough to have a sense of interlocutors’ community memberships or of what can be mutually perceived in the physical environment.

Clark and Marshall, in their study of definite reference, identified two kinds of “copresence” which are important: in addition to “physical co-presence,” in which two or more speakers mutually know they are in the same place, with access to perceptions of the same sounds, sights, and so on, they also share “linguistic co-presence,” in which interlocutors mutually know of prior conversation or text that is recent enough to help with new utterances (Clark & Marshall, 1992). Wallace Chafe (1994), following up questions raised by Clark, Prince (1981), and others, likewise identifies the importance of both physical and linguistic copresence in the pragmatics of communication. Both become important, for example, in speakers’ and writers’ use of demonstrative pronouns. When can one reasonably say, “*That* is ridiculous,” or “I want some of *those*,” and expect to be understood? Physical and linguistic copresence become key in the use of definite reference as well, in interlocutors’ estimations of what would likely be inferred from “I went to *a gate*, and *the plane* had just left,” vs “I went to *the gate*, and *a plane* had just left.” Chafe identifies that in making statements, interlocutors estimate the “activation cost” (71) of introducing information that is “new” to one’s interlocutor—that is, they estimate how much a statement like “The deer I saw in my neighbour’s garden today

wasn't shy at all" would "cost" in terms of mental effort compared to something like "I saw a deer in my neighbour's garden today. He wasn't shy at all."

In this chapter, I examine how new kinds of copresence challenge how interlocutors can account for self and other, both through face-work and through the pragmatics of audience design. That is, I look at how new ways of being "together" in an environment challenge the ways we put things in online conversations, and hence how we are able to recognize or assert social roles and relations. In the first part of this chapter, drawing on Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's theory of "relevance" in communication, I investigate technology's effects on "copresence." I ask what relevance theory, a theory of cognitive processes and constraints guiding how we design utterances and make implicatures, help us to identify about how internet users manage two developments: new kinds of copresence and communication with people whose local knowledge or loyalty cannot be easily assessed. My analysis underscores that the cognitive challenge of audience design online is also a challenge to self and sociality. In the second and third parts of the chapter, drawing on social theorist Erving Goffman's insights into self-presentation and metadiscourse, I analyze the development of new metadiscursive tools (such as "netiquette" discourse) for managing these cognitive and social dilemmas.

### *Part One: Technology and New Kinds of "Copresence"*

#### *The Guarantee of Relevance*

Sperber and Wilson's theory of "relevance" examines how, by assessing who other people are and what they might know, speakers and listeners decide what to say or how to interpret something someone else has said. Thus relevance theory unfolds how, in

everyday and minute choices at the pragmatic level, we draw on and produce knowledge about people and environments.

Relevance theory unfolds the cognitive processes by which we predict the amount of effort it will take to figure out an utterance and measure whether what we get out of the utterance after figuring it out will be worth the effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Their account asserts that utterances always come with a *guarantee of relevance* (whether or not that guarantee is met), and are met with listeners' *presumption of relevance*—assumptions that gain will be greater than effort. Relevance is achieved by changing—i.e. strengthening or weakening—“assumptions” that are held in the listener's *cognitive environment*, and by changing these assumptions without requiring the listener to make more effort than the change is worth. To meet listeners' “presumption of relevance,” speakers will design their utterances so that listeners expend the least effort possible for the greatest alteration in their cognitive environment.

#### *Estimating What is “Mutually Manifest” to Self and Others*

How do people evaluate likely cognitive effort versus cognitive gain? That is, how do they evaluate whether listeners/readers will be able to figure out what they are getting at without working harder than it is worth? They do so, Sperber and Wilson show, by always attempting to estimate what parts of their environment they *mutually* know that they both have access to. Another way to put this is that interlocutors are always assessing what parts of their environment *could potentially be “mutually manifest,”* or “perceptible or inferable” (39) to both parties.

Relevance, in other words, can be achieved only if what the speaker utters can be processed with the help of a context that is fairly readily available to the listener. Peter,

hearing “our friend down the hall,” has access to a context in which the utterances makes sense. He might reason thus:

1. You and he work in an office.
  2. People who work in offices often sit down the hall from one another.
  3. You have a colleague, Barb, who sits down the hall from you and the speaker.
  4. This colleague is involved in a situation that is being kept secret.
  5. Keeping secrets sometimes requires using code words for things, including for people.
  6. Many of the people you and Peter can see around you in the coffee shop might overhear; since they might be personally affected by the embezzling of funds, or might take that information to the press, they cannot be trusted with secret information.
5. “Our friend down the hall” refers to Barb.

Since you and Peter mutually know that he has access to the contexts needed, you can feel reasonably comfortable making your statement—and Peter can feel reasonably confident that you intended him to reason thus.

Writers/speakers assess the “mutual cognitive environment” (41) they share with their interlocutors (equally, readers/listeners do the same) in three ways:

- 1) by taking into account the physical environment shared by the conversation participants;
- 2) by considering what information both might have in “encyclopaedic entries” (87) in the memory; and

3) by keeping in mind what would be in the readers'/listeners' short-term memory in response to communication that has just occurred. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986)

These ways of assessing “mutual cognitive environments” share Clark *et al.*'s, Prince's, Chafe's, and others' interest in the effect of shared perception of a physical environment and of the effects of past utterances on present implicatures. Clark and Marshall's (1992) observation that we assess “community memberships” shows one kind of “encyclopedic entry” we might have—entries about types of people. Sperber and Wilson's important contribution to pragmatics is to observe how estimations of what is mutually *perceptible* or *inferable* inform our confidence in other interlocutors' ability to achieve relevance. We can make such assessment if we are confident in our knowledge that we “recognize” others and are “recognized” ourselves (as colleagues/women/teachers/dog owners/activists/teenagers, as people in the same location, as readers of the same text). Successful utterances increase our confidence that the information we have in our “encyclopaedic entries” about such people (or the information they have about us) is viable.

Critically for understanding how we assess what is “manifest” to others—and what might happen in CMD “conversations”—relevance theory shows that information need not be immediately *obvious* (it does not have to be mutually seen or heard, for instance) as long as it is *accessible* (either “perceptible” or “inferable”). If I think that someone like you, in your environment, can get at the information needed without too much effort (and that you can “know” that I think this,) then I can still proceed with my utterance. “You” and Peter do not need to be in your office building to understand what “our friend down the hall” means—that is, the office building does not have to be part of

your physical environment as long as Peter can perceive or infer it because he can easily access a context in which the office building appears and in which your utterance therefore makes sense. If you and Peter have been at work recently, and you mutually know that work is on your minds, then both of you should be able to access that context easily; the information that can therefore be perceived or inferred allows you Peter to understand “the office down the hall” in a meaningful way.

As I show below, the evolution of CMD, of internet technologies, and of the internet-using population means that estimating such contexts is challenging online in new ways.

### *Mutual Manifestness in Online “Conversations”*

The ability to estimate (or to establish) shared contexts—to proceed with the same assurance about what is mutually manifest—is integral to managing self and sociality online. Achieving relevance may signal shared local knowledge of self, sociality, and environment. It may also signal one’s sense of responsibility toward others (“Am I responsible for talking in a way that is relevant (in pragmatic terms) to these people?”)—including one’s attitude toward people from outside the local (“You are not like me, but I have some responsibility for making my utterance relevant for you.”) Failure to meet the guarantee of relevance may underscore one’s difference from that interlocutor, or may demonstrate a lack of care for or knowledge about one’s interlocutor. New communicative conditions in CMD affect what information can be or is “mutually manifest” to participants by virtue of shared physical environments, ““encyclopedic” entries in the memory,” and “short-term memory in response to communication that has just occurred.” That is, they appear to disrupt expectations of the ways we assess what

others can perceive or infer. Online, how can we act with assurance that we share a cognitive environment with another person or group? How do people guarantee relevance in online environments?

Online “conversations” require internet users to respond to changes in both physical and linguistic copresence as they fulfill conversational responsibilities to others. Research has begun to identify how participants in *synchronous* communication—that is, communication (like online “chat”) where participants produce utterances at roughly the same time as each other—proceed to deal with the pragmatics of such conversations. Scholars, for example, have begun to ask questions about participant roles and responsibilities in chat conversations. Herring (1999), in “Interactional Coherence in CMC,” examines how speakers in chat rooms adapt to “limitations imposed by messaging systems on turn-taking and reference”; Stein and Zitzen address the question of how chat users ratify participants as well as monitor and sanction overhearers (2004). In such synchronic conversations, changes to copresence can be managed relatively straightforwardly because unclear utterances can be immediately queried and corrected. If confusion or misunderstanding can be signaled and addressed quickly within the conversation, users’ knowledge of social roles and relations can also be refined; knowing that I have incorrectly assessed what would make sense to someone by virtue of physical or linguistic copresence—including by virtue of the “community memberships” I believe that someone has—I can adjust accordingly. In synchronous communication like chat or a multiplayer online video game, we can imagine speakers managing pragmatics, and through pragmatics managing self and sociality, with some facility.

But how do they do so in *asynchronous* CMD, in blogs and blog comments, listservs, forums, bulletin boards, and so forth? How do they do so when messages are produced and then read later, as opposed to the instant back-and-forth of synchronous conversation that allows for easy querying and clarification? User metadiscourse suggests that audience design (in one's own and others' discourse) in asynchronous discourse is more complicated than we might expect, in part because user metadiscourse often characterizes asynchronous discourse as being "conversation-like." In his post on "The etiquette of commenting," for example, blogger Kevin Rapley ("DigiKev") articulates his view of blogging as "conversation." When a reader comments on a blog post, he writes,

Someone has continued *the conversation*, added to the discussion or simply said thanks for the article or mention. In my book it would be pretty rude if I didn't reply back. Isn't this what *social media* is all about, *conversing* with one another? (2008) (emphasis mine)

His emphasis on the *social* nature of the medium and the resulting conversation reminds us that self and sociality are worked out in the pragmatics of such everyday utterances as blog posts and blog comments.<sup>8</sup> Given how we have learned to manage self and sociality in conversation, this draws attention to how much might be at stake for self and sociality in how users design and interpret utterances online.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rapley's assertion here echoes scholarship that has characterized CMD as a "hybrid" between speech and writing—suggesting the need to find new ways of managing the pragmatics of communication. For instance, linguist Naomi Baron, in 2003, explaining "Why Email Looks Like Speech," noted "With regard to such parameters as language style, assumptions about recipient responses, identity of audience, and presuppositions about durability of message, email seems to be Janus-faced—at once resembling and not resembling speech ... ( 86).

Other scholars have likewise noted ways that newsgroups resemble "conversations"; Michel Marcoccia, for instance, in his study of newsgroups for French wine enthusiasts, calls these "online polylogues" (2004).

Such asynchronous “conversations” pose special challenges not necessarily by virtue of “anonymity” or “reduced cues” but by virtue of *new kinds* of copresence. Speakers and listeners online take into account the ways that copresence *is* at work in such asynchronic conversations. Marcoxia’s study of newsgroups or “online polylogues” (2004), for instance, shows how understandings of copresence may draw on shared knowledge of time and convention rather than of shared visual stimuli. His study identifies sophisticated understandings of participant roles local to newsgroup users familiar with the “conversation structure” and “participation framework” of newsgroups.

*Adjusting to Media: Critical Perspectives on “Grounding” and “Relevance”*

Two important studies about communications technologies’ impact on audience design give ways to think about how people estimate “mutual manifestness” in the face of technologically-mediated copresence. Writing after the emergence of early internet technologies like email, Clark and Brennan (1991) took up the question of how the medium of communication might influence interlocutors’ estimations of the “common ground.” Specifically, they inquired about the process by which interlocutors made sure that (to borrow from Sperber and Wilson) their understanding of their mutual cognitive environments was still salient. We cannot, they argued, always rely on negative feedback (a frown, a question, a request for clarification) to tell us when our understanding of “common ground” is failing; we need to find other ways of “grounding” communication:

In communication, common ground cannot be properly updated without a process we shall call *grounding*...*In conversation, for example, the participants try to establish that what has been said has been understood.* In our terminology, they

try to ground what has been said—that is, make it part of their common ground.

(128, emphasis added)

Clark and Brennan make the important point that medium makes a difference in how we make a common ground with our interlocutors—in how we can proceed with confidence in our communication with others: “Grounding,” they observe, “takes one shape in face-to-face conversation but another in personal letters. It takes one shape in casual gossip but another in calls to directory assistance” (128).

They identify a list of “grounding criterion” (129) which help interlocutors account for variations in grounding from medium to medium. In addition to “Copresence,” they identify, for instance,:

*2. Visibility: A and B are visible to each other. ...They may also be able to see each other...without being able to see what each other is doing or looking at;*

*5. Simultaneity: A and B can send and receive at once and simultaneously.*

...Other media are cotemporal but not simultaneous, such as the kind of keyboard teleconferencing that transmits characters only after the typist hits a carriage return;

*7. Reviewability: B can review A's messages, and*

*8. Revisability: A can revise messages for B. ...In face-to-face and telephone conversations, most self-repairs must be done publicly. (all excerpted from p. 141) (emphasis in original)*

Clark and Brennan themselves map each of the criterion they identify onto different media. For example, they suggest that in face-to-face conversation, constraints are “Copresence, visibility, audibility, cotemporality, simultaneity, sequentiality” (we share

the same physical environment, can see and hear each other, and so on) (142), while email and letters are both described as constrained by “reviewability” and “revisability.”

This useful mapping of criteria to media suggests that speakers/writers develop expectations of grounding that are *local to media*, regardless of with whom we are speaking. Imagining an interlocutor in the presence of different communications media with the same expectations as ourselves about grounding, we could more comfortably estimate our mutual cognitive environment because we could assume that ways of grounding communication in that medium would be mutually manifest. Without such ways of grounding being part of our shared mental environment, making such an explanation over the telephone or via another media would increase in difficulty. Part of what is interesting about users’ treatment of asynchronous CMD as “conversation” is that CMD conversations include such a diversity of affordances, participants, ranges of knowledge, and so on, that unsettle our ability to assess what is part of our shared “environment,” including what methods of grounding are possible or preferred.

In the second important contribution to understanding how media technologies change what is mutually perceptible or inferable, Philip Diderichson also brings relevance theory to understanding mediated communication. Holding “face-to-face communication to be the prototypical communicative situation” (2006), he details features of mediated communication relevant to speakers meeting the guarantee of relevance. He identifies nine features that can be used to measure mediated communication’s difference from or similarity to face-to-face communication: “synchronicity,” “syntopicity,” “audience size,” “multimodality,” “non-linearity,” “interactivity,” “permanence,” “portability,” and “WWW Access.” A full engagement

with each of these is beyond the scope of this chapter, but turning to his treatment of one of these, “WWW access,” shows how the internet can, to use Diderichson’s phrasing, “augment” communication to make utterances more relevant.

Diderichson rightly notes that WWW access can make utterances more relevant by making more information mutually manifest:

WWW can be seen as an enormous, cognitively external, encyclopedic resource, in Sperber and Wilson’s terms a ‘set of assumptions’ which, when available in a communicative situation, constitutes a fourth way for the recipient of extending the current context.

The WWW extends context along the same lines as other compendiums of information—encyclopedias, directories, organizational charts, manuals, mapbooks, and so on. For instance, knowing that interlocutors can “Google” an unknown acronym, or otherwise find information online that an interlocutor does not have a mental “encyclopedia entry” for, makes more information mutually manifest. Just so, a coworker might say to a new employee and then rush off, “I think so, but check with Jody,” leaving the new employee to puzzle through who Jody might be. She could do so assuming that if the new employee did not know Jody, she could look her up in the organizational chart or the office phone directory—she could use a mutually known resource to extend context enough to make “Ask Jody” a “relevant” utterance.

*“Where is Here?”: A New Question for Theories of Grounding and Relevance in CMD*

Looking to two examples of user discourse shows the kinds of factors that Clark and Brennan and Diderichson observe at work in how the medium of communication impacts what contexts we feel we share with others. These examples of communication

from asynchronous media, examples from many similar examples online, ask “Where is here?” Their asking (and answering) of this question draws attention to key changes in how we need to estimate mutual cognitive environments online; it points, moreover, toward questions unanswered by approaches like those of Clark and Brennan and Diderichson.

The first example comes from a guide to “netiquette” written for visitors to an American commercial site, *Appraisal Today*, a site run by a real estate appraiser and addressing other real estate appraisers.<sup>9</sup> Advising appraisers on how to proceed in newsgroups, message boards, and other kinds of asynchronic conversations, O'Rourke instructs: “Let people know where you are located. You could be anywhere in the world. For example, saying "Business is good here" without saying where "here" is” (O'Rourke, last updated 2008). O'Rourke's netiquette advice draws readers' attention to:

1. The lack of physical copresence with other interlocutors;
2. The translocal circulation of CMD (the fact of communication with people not from “here”); and
3. The presence of readers without an “encyclopaedic entry” (Sperber & Wilson, 87) for the writer's location (that is, interlocutors who cannot be expected to know or keep track of personal information about each others' locations.)

In Clark and Brennan's terms, real-estate appraiser O'Rourke is reminding readers of grounding criterion like “copresence” (they are not in the same physical space), “visibility” (they cannot see each other) and possibly “revisability” (in telling readers to

---

<sup>9</sup> The site offers “news, information, links, and jokes” and sells a newsletter, books, and CDs.

be careful with their utterance the first time, she is implying that revision is not possible or incurs too great a “cost”). In Diderichson’s terms, O’Rourke draws particular attention to “audience size” (the audience is potentially much larger and more diverse than in usual encounters).

These reminders seem reasonable ones. However, if we imagine an appraiser writing “Business is good here,” we can also imagine that other features of online communication might be relevant too even though not apparent to O’Rourke. For example, perhaps “reviewability” (a reader could glance over past posts on the newsgroup or forum and see the person’s location) might mitigate the difficulty of “here” for someone who did not know the writer’s location. The combination of “interactivity” (Diderichson, 2006) and “revisability” (Clark & Brennan, 1998) might also be a factor: a reader wondering “where is here?” could respond, and the message could be revised (people engage in this kind of response and revision frequently in forum and bulletin board posts by quoting previous posts.) We can imagine, that is, different grounding constraints and features of CMD than those imagined by O’Rourke. Internet users may not have the same perceptions of the features of CMD and grounding constraints as other users.

Example two, from an online forum (MyGen.uk.ca), complicates things further by raising a question about the mutual manifestness of user responsibilities toward other users. The MyGen forum is a resource for people creating sophisticated MySpace “profiles,”<sup>10</sup> with users who appear young, sociable, and tech-savvy. In the midst of a

---

<sup>10</sup> MySpace is a social networking site. Members create their own profile page with graphics, information about musical tastes, and so on. This act of self-display is available to one’s “MySpace friends,” whose

free-flowing “conversation” about “rainy old England,” one member posts at 7:34 that “it aint rainy here,” a statement that might be opaque to someone without background information about the member. This information is not inferable from his picture or name, but can be accessed with some effort by a user with the right kind of knowledge of forum features: by clicking a link in his name which leads to his profile,<sup>11</sup> one can find out speaker A’s location; by going through archived old posts, one might be able to find out as well. Speaker A’s post in fact appears to be opaque to another member, who asks, one minute later at 7:35, “Where is here for you? it aint raining here either but im in florida.”

Here we see interactivity, multimodality (the combination of text and pictures), the lack of physical copresence and visibility and so on in action. What this example also shows, however, is that interlocutors’ sense of responsibility to others is also a factor in the effects of such features. Speaker A’s utterance implies assumptions about what is or can be known by his listener; he assumes that other speakers can figure out “here” or that it does not matter if they cannot do so. It also implies assumptions about how much he considers himself responsible for minimizing the cognitive “cost” to all the members of the forum, and assumptions about other users’ knowledge of his sense of responsibility. Given speaker B’s quick response—in spite of the fact that forums are technically a form of asynchronous communication—this example suggests that we may not need to

---

pages are linked to one’s own forming a kind of network; members may also choose to make their profiles public (searchable by Google and available to any reader.)

<sup>11</sup> Forum profiles are not the same as profiles on social networking sites, though they share the same name. Anyone who joins a forum or bulletin board as a regular member is given a profile, in which they can choose to provide their name, a pseudonym, a picture, an email address, and so on. Profiles also usually tell readers if the member is currently online (or at least logged in as members), how long he or she has been a member, how many posts he or she has made on the forum or bulletin board, and so on. If one wishes to find out more about a forum member who has written a post, or to contact a member privately, one can click on a link next to the member’s post.

maximize relevance in the same way if people can reply right away to clarify information. Calling for clarification, speaker B is in fact friendly rather than treating the first member as though he had been rude or negligent, suggesting that perhaps in that locality, speaker A is justified in making his assumptions.

The contributions of Clark and Brennan and Diderichson are both useful and important in understanding how estimating “mutual cognitive environments” may be managed online. As these two examples have shown, however, questions remain about how we know that others know what we know, and whether they know that we know. While Clark and Brennan’s mapping of grounding constraints to media suggests ways that expectations may become local to email or letter-writing, it leaves unasked the question of how interlocutors are able to know that that particular relationship between grounding constraint and media is part of their mutual cognitive environment. How am I able to know that I and the people I am talking to via a communication medium—in a discussion thread, on the phone, on an answering machine, etc.—share the same *consciousness* of that medium (including the grounding constraints at work) needed for us to make sense of each others’ utterances? This is surely a prerequisite of proceeding with assurance in the face of “reviewability,” “revisability,” and so on. Though some constraints like “simultaneity” and “revisability” may be determined more than others by technology, others will be much more subject to local variation. For example, “audability” online is a function both of technology (the presence of a sound file, of speakers, of an audio card) and of local estimations of a kind of user (someone with enough bandwidth to play audio files, someone who is not in an environment where he or she must “mute” the sound on webpages, and so on). As the advice to appraisers shows,

users may make quite different assumptions about which constraints are relevant and how they work.

Likewise, Diderichson's (2006) useful mapping of the qualities by which we can measure differences or similarities between face-to-face and mediated communication raises questions. Diderichson himself is careful not to suggest that *any* utterance will be relevant just because so much information is potentially "perceptible or inferable." He cautions that the cognitive effort of searching out information must still be less than the cognitive gain. "There are limits," he acknowledges,

as to how much one is willing and able to search the web for information in order to understand an otherwise not very meaningful stimulus (or text). But if the information is relevant enough to be worth the effort, there is no problem. For instance, it would be possible for two persons communicating via an internet mediated, and thereby WWW connected, video phone (i.e. a webcam), to hint at assumptions that the interlocutor—mutually manifestly—had access to over the web, e.g. a street map, if that was easier than explaining the location of some place of interest.

Diderichson's caution about the "limits" of how much one will search draws attention to the first of two key questions:

1. If an "encyclopedic" resource (like the WWW) has the potential for extending context, how is that potential limited by local factors?

Examining a non-CMD example suggests some of the ways that such potential may be locally constrained. I offer the example of a booklet written by government for a range of people involved in the oil and gas industry (potential investors new to an area, truck

drivers knowledgeable about the area but not about the industry). To minimize the effort readers will need to figure out the text, and to avoid speaking in terms that are overly simplistic for their audience, the writers of such a booklet must decide whether statements like “*the* tight gas potential in this region” will be clear enough to their mixed audience. Writers may feel comfortable making such statements if they are aware of other resources to which confused readers could turn if necessary. For instance, government may produce other (more explanatory) publications that could be requested, or there may a glossary of terms on the website of the people who put out the booklet. That is, writers may assume that such information is perceptible or inferable by virtue of readers’ access to other resources which, like the WWW, extend context in useful ways.

This assumption in itself constructs those readers as local subjects—as people who know of the same resources for extending context that we know. If we are talking to someone who is not local—a foreign exchange student, for example, or someone very new to the business world—we might not assume that he or she knows of the same resources for extending context that we know of (a foreign student may not know of the community bulletin board; someone new to business may not know that organization charts exist.) Writers’ assumptions about the usefulness of such resources for extending context are also guided by their knowledge of local situations—for example, of whether foreign investors and truck drivers (and other anticipated readers) are able to conveniently access those extra resources. For example, requesting more government publications might take too long—perhaps an investment decision requires immediate information and understanding. Perhaps truck drivers wanting to better understand the

industry they are thinking of getting involved in are away from stable internet access, and cannot easily access an online glossary.

Likewise, when internet users assess how WWW technologies like Google or MapQuest can extend what is mutually manifest, they need also to assess those technologies in terms of local access, local knowledge, and local situations. The potential of the WWW to extend context as Diderichson describes will be very different in a locality with high speed internet, home internet access, and high rates of computer literacy than in a locality where users rely on dial-up services, are restricted to using busy internet cafés, and may be less familiar with new web information retrieval programs.

Less obviously but more importantly, we need also to think about another local constraint, tied to how people manage self and sociality: people's local sense of the *responsibility* they have for ensuring maximum relevance and to whom. Even if interlocutors mutually know of ways for listeners/readers to extend what is "perceptible or inferable," the effect that will have on communication will depend on local conventions regarding what speaker A owes to listener B—as the MyGen example suggests. The writer of the oil and gas booklet needs to consider more than the practical local factors—such as a lack of access to resources that could extend context to make "the tight gas potential" make sense to his or her readers. Given the relationship between themselves and the group putting out the booklet, he or she needs also to consider how hard the foreign investor or truck driver can be expected to work: if one interlocutor is soliciting the funds or cooperation of another person, perhaps expecting that person to go to another resource to figure out "the tight gas potential" is inappropriate. In fact, if the

situation and relationship between interlocutors is fairly established and clear, this should be obvious to the writer.

Likewise, online, we also need to think not only about whether the WWW *can* extend context for our interlocutors, but whether we can shift the burden of mental effort to those interlocutors because of that potential. For example, we need to decide whether it is appropriate to a) presuppose knowledge, b) assume that confused readers can go look up what they need to in order to access the context needed to make an implicature, or c) hyperlink to a website providing the needed context.

The second question that arises from Diderichson's observations, flowing from the first question, is this:

1. How do interlocutors know that the WWW's potential for extending context (and the implications of that extension for interlocutors' responsibilities regarding relevance) *is itself* manifest to their interlocutors?

Online environments *may* replicate situations in which estimating these things is relatively straightforward (a coworker assuming another coworker knows of the organizational chart; a booklet writer confident in his/her knowledge of stakeholder needs). However, as metadiscourse often reminds us, online environments also host situations which appear to be much less straightforward (like the discussion forums in which O'Rourke imagines real estate appraisers operating). That is, in online environments, our "encyclopaedic entries" may not adequately tell us how our interlocutors can and do use the WWW, because those interlocutors may be relatively foreign to us. Our "encyclopaedic entries" about interlocutors *may* not tell us, for example, whether people have high speed internet, whether they know of resources like

Wikipedia, or whether they feel that an author providing a hyperlink is sufficient for meeting the guarantee of relevance. Public and scholarly discourse about the internet also complicates matters when it tells us that “people behave differently online”—potentially undermining our confidence that we can assess such matters.

Thus this second question is trickier: how do speakers A and B in the MyGen example above—or the other participants in the thread—know that all of these factors (local access to bandwidth, local knowledge of forum features like linked profile pages, local knowledge of interactivity, local knowledge of relative responsibilities in this new environment) are mutually manifest to the others? The ability to estimate knowledge or contexts shared with others online requires the ability to estimate what is locally mutually manifest regarding two things:

- a) technology’s ability to extend contexts, and
- b) the effect of that extension on responsibilities to other subjects.

The kinds of features in mediated communication that Clark and Brennan and Diderichson identify as important to meeting pragmatic responsibilities are thus local in these practical ways (subject to local economics, policies, and so forth), and in terms of subjects’ “local knowledge” of other subjects and responsibilities to them.

### *Part Two: Face-work and Relevance in CMD*

#### *Who Are We and What Do We Know Online?*

It is not only observers and theorists who ask the questions raised above, but Internet users in the virtual coffee shops and other settings of online “conversations.” As I have shown in Chapter One, scholarly and folk metadiscourse about CMD proliferates

online in response to perceptions of how the internet impacts self and sociality. How does public metadiscourse about CMD become important to estimations of what is “manifest”—“perceptible” or “inferable”? Analyzing two kinds of metadiscourse—netiquette literature and national news reports of Canadian internet use—I argue that one way to estimate what others know (and what they think we know) is through exposure to metadiscourse that assists internet users in face-work, which in turn assists them in designing or understanding utterances.

I turn to social theorist Erving Goffman’s observations about “face-work” to suggest that users’ estimations of “mutual cognitive environments” (including beliefs about responsibilities to the guarantee of relevance) are informed as much by the social identities their interlocutors take as by technologies themselves. That is, in trying to make “relevant” utterances, internet users are informed by the fact that technology may change how they can say things, but also by the fact that they are talking to a “soccer mom,” an “activist,” or a “Starcraft aficionado.”<sup>12</sup> I suggest also that metadiscourse plays an important role in both asserting such identities and building the stereotypes by which we recognize and respond to them. Writers of metadiscourse tell us who they think they are, or who others are, building up images of identity that we can recognize and draw on to act with more assurance online.

In his study of face-work (1955; 1959), Goffman observed the ways in every social encounter, people endeavour to recognize and be recognized as particular kinds of people. Born and raised in Canada, and living in the United States during his teaching career, Goffman keenly observed social roles and relations within local North American

---

<sup>12</sup> Starcraft is an extraordinarily popular and influential science fiction strategy-type video game. It can be played online in “multiplayer” mode with players from around the world. The game is especially popular in South Korea, where players may play around the clock in “video game cafes” that are open all night.

contexts and within the local context of each social encounter. His dramaturgical metaphor suggests that people act as “players,” taking on roles that they act out in collaboration with others. Goffman observes that a participant in a social encounter takes a “line” in interaction, seeking to have that line accepted, and that if accepted, other participants attempt to address him or her in a manner consistent with that line (to avoid disrupting their provisional agreement about the situation and those within it). This is not to say, he cautions, that people are only acting—that they are being false in any way. Rather, if one “takes a line” as a particular kind of person in an encounter, and that line is recognized and accepted by others in that encounter, one *is* that person within the space of that encounter. Identity, he suggests, is a product of the acceptance of a line:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (252-3)

The self in such encounters is a social identity—a role one can see oneself playing and that one feels will be recognizable to others in the social drama.

Goffman’s study of face-work helps us address both changes to copresence and the questions raised above about a) people’s local sense of their responsibilities for ensuring maximum relevance to different people and b) how interlocutors can estimate which effects of technology are mutually manifest to others. Goffman shows that though

physical copresence is important, the absence of the face-to-face contact associated with physical copresence does not have universal effects. Expectations of face-work continue to operate in mediated communication, and face-work is implicitly local rather than universal. Participants' evaluation and treatment of other participants is guided by local knowledge of "lines" or social identities that may be claimed, of the elements of "personal front" commensurate with those lines, of the nature of the setting of the encounter, and so on; the provisional agreement that emerges about the nature of the situation is also, as I discuss in Chapter Three, local to that encounter.

If we accept that participants in social encounters are motivated by face-work, then we can observe that their knowledge of the selves performed (both by themselves and others) will often guide how they assess what they and those others mutually know or can perceive. For example, if one "performs," to use Goffman's parlance, as "savvy Internet user" or, conversely, as a "newbie," and other interlocutors accept that performance, those interlocutors will design their utterances accordingly. If they accept someone as a "savvy user," it would be face-threatening to explain internet acronyms or to instruct their reader to "click on a link" (presumably a savvy internet user would know to click a link without being instructed.)

Given the intersubjective process of recognition and acceptance at work in estimating and maintaining "face," we can begin to see the importance of metadiscourse about CMD—both its production and its circulation. As Goffman himself observes, metadiscourse plays an important role in instructing subjects on matters of face-work: he identifies etiquette literature as important to telling people how to arrange matters in the face of changing conditions for social encounters. For example, etiquette books, he notes,

have outlined strategies for managing setting and “props” in specific situations. Etiquette books also, in Goffman's account, remind people of their responsibilities for helping other participants (what he calls the other “team”) maintain their performance:

Where a performer jeopardizes the image of self projected by the other team, we may speak of “bricks” or of the performer having “put his foot in it.” Etiquette manuals provide classic warnings against such indiscretions... (1959, 234)

One of the central themes of some metadiscourse about CMD is that internet users renege on their responsibilities for face-work—that they act as if they have no responsibilities to their interlocutors because of the lack of physical copresence. Is it the case that face-work becomes irrelevant in social encounters that do not occur face to face?<sup>13</sup> This kind of claim has, in fact, been made both in user meta-discourse and in studies of internet user psychology. In a recent article in the *New York Times* (“Whatever Happened to Online Etiquette?”), for instance, David Pogue evinces horror at “how hostile \*ordinary\* people are to each other online these days,” offering several of his “current theories.” The first two theories on his list are representative of a larger group of complaints found in user meta-discourse about CMD:

---

<sup>13</sup>Goffman himself gives us reason to entertain such a possibility. “Interaction,” he writes in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, “may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's action *when in one another's immediate physical presence*” ( 15) (emphasis mine). That is, face-work is premised on interlocutors' ability to mutually assess each other in conditions of physical copresence. In “On Face-Work,” his earlier study of face-work, however, Goffman does allow for situations other than face-to-face encounters, observing that “Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to face [sic] *or mediated contact* with other participants” (5) (emphasis mine). However, his observations are still tied to physical copresence: the etiquette of business letters, he suggests, is a kind of face-work that can occur “*by virtue of co-presence*” (1) (emphasis mine). That is, writers of business letters may have either been copresent with each other in the past, or have the potential to meet in the future (hence the need to protect the face of both participants); enough may be known about the businessmen (by virtue of their roles in a field of activity) to be able to assume shared knowledge of etiquette conventions necessary to take and protect a line.

\* On the Internet, you're anonymous. Since you don't have to face the person you're dumping on, you don't see any reason to display courtesy.

\* On the Internet, you're anonymous. You worry that your comments might get lost in the shuffle, so you lay it on thick to enhance your noticeability.

(Pogue, 2006)

This kind of complaint about civility and anonymity is echoed both in scholars' examinations of netiquette discourse and of "flaming" and in social psychologists' framing questions about the effects of anonymity online, as I have discussed in Chapter One. Others have argued that new characteristics of CMD are results of overall changing attitudes toward face-work that characterize society at large.<sup>14</sup>

Yet netiquette discourse also shows that users are invested in face-work online. In writing, publishing, and circulating netiquette guides, users are performing face-work by performing selves who care about "politeness," "clear communication," "efficiency," and the other social goods that different netiquette texts promote. This investment in face-work can be seen not only in the act of producing netiquette literature but in specific rules or guidelines. For example, netiquette texts warn against activities that will make others or ourselves lose face, offering variations of Virginia Shea's rule "Make yourself look good online" (1994). Lea of Baltimore, for example, warns against "Bigotry: Posts containing racial, sexual, ethnic, size or religious slurs should never be posted. Discrimination and/or bigotry is not cool in any way shape, or form" (sic) ("Netiquette,"

---

<sup>14</sup> Baron, for instance, drawing on Goffman, suggests that American culture's increasing rejection of social stratification and acceptance of casual behaviour has led to a "decline of public face" (2003, 89); this decline, she suggests, is reflected in the fact that "writing in general has become more speech-like" and that email, correspondingly, is characterized by "messages that are more off-the-cuff than reflective, more opinionated than objective, more blunt than subtle" (2003, 88).

*Lea of Baltimore's Blog*). Establishing and maintaining face online, netiquette both tells and demonstrates, remains important.

### *Establishing Social Roles and Relations*

Metadiscourse like netiquette discourse therefore promotes and facilitates face-work by fostering the stereotypes—“tech guru,” “newbie,” “rebel,” “intellectual,” “social advocate”<sup>15</sup>—by which we recognize that others taking a line—by helping interlocutors recognize the “pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts” signaling those lines. One effect of metadiscourse is therefore to fill in “encyclopaedic” entries (Sperber & Wilson, 87) of the kind that interlocutors consult in making and interpreting utterances. These entries are filled with our assumptions about people (information we glean from knowing people’s “community memberships” (Clark & Marshall, 1992, 36), things, or ideas. Such entries may be tentative or firm—but, as Sperber and Wilson suggest, become firmer through experience, and, I suggest, through metadiscourse such as that describing people, their consciousness of technology, and their relationship to the local. These are entries not only telling users about practical details of CMD, but about selves people might perform online and the knowledge and responsibilities attached to those selves.

---

<sup>15</sup> As looking at netiquette will show, it is important to remember that protecting “face” refers not only to looking “impolite,” “bigoted,” etc. Goffman defines the “line” one takes as “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (5). This evaluation may include images of self or other like “good/moral/polite/educated person” or “gentleman” (thus requiring commitment to the kinds of writing that Baron sees as in decline in America.) However, a line, or social identity, may include quite different images of self or other: like “tech guru,” “newbie,” “rebel,” “intellectual,” “social advocate.” Protecting “face” means protecting “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself *by the line others assume he has taken* during a particular contact. Face is *an image of self* delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (1955, 5) (emphasis mine)—but approved social attributes will vary according to whose approval is being sought.

Since the early 1990s, guides to netiquette have proliferated.<sup>16</sup> Print guides to “netiquette” began to appear in the mid to late nineties, beginning with Virginia Shea's *Netiquette* in 1994. Shea's *Netiquette* has also been published on the Web by Albion since 1994, and was published in print in Japanese in 1996. Barbara Danet, in her 2001 study of email style, identifies five of these early print guides including Shea's (though she classifies them as “letter-writing” manuals). By the time Shea's and others' print books were being published, however, netiquette was already and was continuing to be a vibrant discourse. Netiquette meta-discourse is widely posted on the Web in a variety of genres. Not only are such texts produced, they are cited and passed around by online users. In some newsgroups, documents containing netiquette rules are posted weekly or biweekly. Meta-discussion of netiquette in discussion group threads and blogs shows that “netiquette,” while it is said to have originated with Usenet newsgroup users, is now considered applicable to a broad range of types of CMD, from personal email to online chat, listservs, and blogs. Netiquette texts now include diverse genres from diverse

---

<sup>16</sup> In the early 1990s, when the WWW was only just becoming available, “netiquette” did not exist in the codified and widely dispersed form it does now. One could not observe the widespread circulation of a body of texts, collected under the rubric of “netiquette,” which codified preferred practices in web environments. Two early influential studies of “CMC” point out this absence. Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire in 1984 commented on the lack of “formal or informal instruction in an etiquette of electronic communication” and “the absence of norms governing the social interaction” (1125-1126; cited in Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 9, 26). Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore (1991), in their study of “Interactive Written Discourse” or “IWD” (what we now call “chat”) seven years after Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire, contested the absence of norms, but suggested that the norms being developed by social groups using “IWD” were in a state of transition (26). Denise Murray's 1991 study of the “cognitive and contextual strategies” of synchronous chat refers to strategies that arise from technological and cognitive constraints on writers, but mentions nothing about a climate of discourse norms which might influence strategies. Nowhere in these early studies is there an awareness of a body of rules or texts which codify features of CMD.

Histories of netiquette in netiquette texts themselves locate the beginning of the discourse in the experiences of early Usenet users, often computer professionals. Netiquette guides which tell the “history” of netiquette argue that NQ conventions, like the linguistic changes to which they respond, have come “from below,” arising out of a commonly-experienced need, rather than being imposed from above. That is, metadiscourse about language regulation tells us that the “rules” come from consensus among users. This part of the lore of netiquette portrays early users as taking initiative in response to commonly perceived problems.

sources: FAQ (or “frequently asked questions”) addressing netiquette, blog posts about netiquette, university web pages detailing netiquette regulations, web pages written by concerned internet users, print and online monographs, corporate pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations, and newspaper and magazine articles—in English, and, increasingly, in other languages.

In writing netiquette literature, commenting on it, or hyperlinking to it, internet users can lay claim to social roles and relations—roles, like “tech guru,” that give us a sense of people’s attitude toward and understanding of technology and online culture, and that therefore can inform our pragmatic choices. Such texts not only give individuals a resource through which to perform such selves, they also foster images of others can recognize and account for in their estimations of mutual manifestness. They promote another image as well: that of the “newb,” or “newbie,” a user new to the internet and a little wet behind the ears. In pragmatic terms, the “newb” is someone lacking knowledge of conventions like the use of all-caps to indicate “shouting,” common acronyms, the proper use of emoticons, and so on. Netiquette texts sometimes address the “newbie” directly, often taking a welcoming though sometimes warning attitude—assuming that a reader in need of netiquette instruction is a new internet user. In other cases, the “newbie” is talked about rather than addressed directly; more seasoned readers are addressed who need to be reminded to watch for and recognize the “newbie” and account for what may not be known or perceivable to him or her, as we see in the advice below from “RFC1855 - Netiquette Guidelines,” a seminal<sup>17</sup> netiquette text published in 1995 for the Usenet community:

---

<sup>17</sup> A Google search for “RFC1855” in October, 2008 produced 56,000 hits.

Today, the community of Internet users includes people who are new to the environment. These "Newbies" are unfamiliar with the culture and don't need to know about transport and protocols. In order to bring these new users into the Internet culture quickly, this Guide offers a minimum set of behaviors which organizations and individuals may take and adapt for their own use.

That "newb" or "newbie" is now a recognizable social identity that can be claimed for oneself is attested to in internet users' use of the term to describe themselves (calling themselves "newb") or their discourse (using phrases like "newb question," or "newbie question" to refer to their own questions.)<sup>18</sup>

Another significant development in the spread of netiquette discourse for face-work (and hence for pragmatics) is the production of netiquette guidelines for particular media and communities. "Blog netiquette" may serve as an example of how new "lines" emerge or are consolidated via netiquette discourse in relation to local media like blogs, forums, or social networking sites. Like Kevin Rapley, quoted earlier, many bloggers post (and readers comment) on "blog netiquette," setting out expectations, disappointments, pet peeves, and so on. In producing this kind of discourse, bloggers and their commenters promote an image of both "blogger" and "blog reader": of people who belong to the "blogosphere"; that is, they lay claim to identities as "bloggers" or "blog readers" committed to blogging as a particular kind of communicative event and to the "blogosphere" as a particular kind of setting. Their netiquette guides not only assert such social identities, but feed the images of those identities, consolidating expectations of other "bloggers" or "blog readers."

---

<sup>18</sup> "Newb" may be claimed for oneself or used to describe someone else, either in a critical way or as a kind of disclaimer. "Noob," on the other hand, is always derogatory.

The production of netiquette literature *offline* performs a similar function for professional communities. While at one time, one would have found references to "netiquette" only in online environments, now it is cited in the press, and in domains as diverse as law, public education, and ethical theory. Netiquette guides have been adopted by educational institutions, by corporations and by government (for example, McCaffree & Innis, 1985). From library sciences to distance education, sports therapy and business, industry publications have begun to publish articles on netiquette as more professions come to use the Internet in a professional capacity. In articles like Sturges' (2002) for librarians, Conrad's (2002) for distance educators, Turville's (2001) for teachers, and Russell's (2000) for journalists, netiquette discourse serves to clarify the values and expertise of the professional "line" and to suggest the kinds of assumptions that librarians, distance educators, journalists, and others addressed by such populations can make about what is (or should be) known or perceivable in online environments by their fellow professionals.<sup>19</sup>

*Instructions on Audience Design for Newbies and Oldtimers*

Encountering such presentations of self like the self-identified librarian in a forum, a self-identified "newb" on a bulletin board or in email, or a self-identified "committed blog reader," an interlocutor exposed to such metadiscourse has information about what such types of people are likely to know or be able to perceive particularly in

---

<sup>19</sup> One implication of this function of metadiscourse is that it can serve as a tool allowing communities, institutions, or what Goffman calls "teams" (1959, 77) to assert what other members are allowed to expect, and expected to expect. Teams may consist of groups of professionals (doctors, or librarians), genders (Goffman offers the example of teenage girls), members of a locality (people from "our town"), or any other group whose members agree to act as if the behaviour of one person affects the face of another person because both are staking claim to the same social role. As a librarian online, one can expect other librarians to know "these things." Even if there is a disjuncture between what other librarians actually know and what metadiscourse tells one they know, metadiscourse makes clear that it is fine and good to act as if these things are known.

relation to the medium of communication. For example, an interlocutor has information regarding the “grounding constraints” identified by Clark and Brennan (1998) and the features of mediated communication identified by Diderichson (2006) and, in her examination of hyperlinks, Tosca (2000).

For instance, looking more closely at common themes in netiquette literature suggests how readers are instructed on what different kinds of selves can be expected to know about changes to physical and linguistic copresence.

*Physical copresence.* As I have discussed already, netiquette literature frequently addresses the grounding criterion, “A and B share the same physical environment” (Clark & Brennan, 1998, 41). One of the first and most consistent statements netiquette makes is that we need to adjust our discourse for the absence of face-to-face contact. Three very common types of statement about the issue of physical copresence appear in netiquette literature to make this point.

1. *The reminder that we cannot use body language and tone of voice in CMD.*

The following example from the Yale University Library netiquette guide demonstrates this frequent concern:

Even with the best of intentions, misunderstandings are likely to occur in almost any type of communication. Nevertheless, it is possible to repair glitches in a face-to-face dialog or even a telephone conversation before any lasting damage occurs.

In a face-to-face situation or telephone conversation you are able to change your tone of voice, to rephrase comments and to present body language that welcomes

further communication and thus promotes understanding. Email messages do not offer you the benefit of these signals. (Yale, 2007)

*2. The warning that sarcasm and humour may be misunderstood online due to the lack of paralinguistic cues.*

The netiquette guides below, from business and distance education contexts, demonstrate this widespread belief.

a. **Be careful when using sarcasm and humor.** Without face-to-face communication your joke may be viewed as criticism. When being humorous, try using emoticons to express humor ;-) (tilt your head to the left to see the emoticon smile). (*Effective*, 2004) (emphasis mine)

b. Use sarcasm cautiously. In the absence of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and voice inflections, the context for your sarcasm may be lost, and your message may thus be misinterpreted. (Jacksonville, 2007 May 11)

*3. The reminder that one's interlocutor is a human, not a machine:*

a. It's important to remember that, even though you can't see or hear them, **you are interacting with people.** Therefore, the common rules of basic human kindness still apply. People are not perfect. *They make mistakes and say strange things.* They may even, *intentionally or not, insult or offend others.* Please be as understanding and tolerant as you would in any face-to-face communication. (Crispen, 1994) (emphasis mine)

These three common types of statements in netiquette literature highlight insecurities that basic elements of communication—physical copresence and a consideration of the “humanity” of one’s interlocutor—require caution and new strategies (such as emoticons).

At the same time, such statements foster expectations that some elements of physical copresence can be expected to be mutually manifest to experienced users. For instance, we can expect that experienced users seeing a colon, line, and parenthesis :-)) would see a “smiley” indicating something about the writer’s mood or intention. We might also expect that people’s software would automatically convert those characters in that combination to a more explicit graphical representation of a smile, as happens in MS Word and in many email programs, where the smiley looks more like this: ☺. That is, netiquette literature sometimes draws attention to technology’s potential for offering a modified physical copresence. Finally, these “rules” also instruct readers to be aware that “newbies” may not know or be aware of these effects and of the strategies for overcoming them.

*Linguistic copresence.* The second relevant theme in netiquette literature instructs readers that linguistic copresence is different online than we might expect. Two refrains are important here, netiquette’s portrayal of CMD as “conversational” yet “permanent” and its injunctions to “lurk” and to read “FAQs.”

Netiquette discourse often reflects on the conversational yet permanent nature of CMD, as in the following example:

If posting to Newsgroups, be aware that many are archived, and the archives are available for a very long time. Don't say anything that might come back and haunt

you years down the track. It is generally not possible to retrieve messages once they have been sent. (Albury, 1996)

If online communication is a hybrid of writing and speech, and “conversation-like,” metadiscourse instructs readers that this is conversation that is recorded and searchable. Though this is often couched as a warning, as it is above, it also informs an image of the rational interlocutor as one who *should* know the capabilities for searching out older traces of conversations. Diderichson’s remarks about permanence in mediated communication remind us that user awareness of permanence (fostered by such metadiscourse) also has beneficial effects for speakers’ ability to meet the guarantee of relevance.

Permanence is one of the few factors that expands the mutual cognitive environment relative to what is achievable in unaltered face-to-face interaction. A text enables the reader to go back and look things up in order to make later statements make sense. In relevance theory terms, this can be seen as an external means of backtracking to earlier contexts, and to a certain extent it makes up for the lack of the possibility to directly ask the author what he or she means.

Permanence can be seen as a way of compensating for the limited human cognitive capacity, and this deviation from the prototypical circumstances of communication has proven so beneficial that all media have been made permanent if the current technology allowed it. (2006)

Faced in a listserv posting with an implicature that is difficult, I can easily go back and reread other posts in the thread—even posts a week old—to recover enough context to make sense of the utterance; I can also use a search tool (rather than skimming) to go

through archived texts for the same purpose. Similarly, injunctions to “lurk” and to read the FAQs also suggest expectations that interlocutors ought to be able to access material that is linguistically copresent. For example, a forum “newbie” is often advised to “lurk” until he or she has a sense of local mores, topics covered, and so on—effectively building up linguistic copresence (“reading along”) before saying anything. Such rules make more explicit that the cognitive burden of searching out information that is “perceptible or inferable” may be greater online than off.

In the vigorous authoring and reproduction of netiquette discourse on topics speaking to new conditions of copresence,<sup>20</sup> then, this metadiscourse attempts to consolidate two things: expectations of “polite behaviours” and knowledge of how interlocutors taking on different social identities can and should be expected to meet the guarantee of relevance in online discourse.

### *Part Three: Knowing “Where you are”—and Letting Others Know*

#### *Netiquette and Locality*

Netiquette metadiscourse, I have shown, helps with face-work—like other metadiscourse I examine below, it helps to build our knowledge of types of people and what those types understand about technology and about us. It does so in one way by building stereotypes like “newbie” or “responsible distance educator” that we can draw on when we design our utterances. It does so in another by giving internet users a way to temporarily *take on* such identities and have them accepted by others—a recognizable forum for self-presentation. Engaging in face-work in online “conversations,” we are able

---

<sup>20</sup>Other kinds of copresence, such as new kinds of temporal copresence, are at work here as well, but not treated in this discussion.

to present self and recognize self, to act with some assurance in the pragmatics of communication—to feel confident that others can understand us, or that we are understanding others correctly. Netiquette metadiscourse’s enhancement of our ability to estimate others’ consciousness of language and technology helps overcome the challenges identified in my earlier discussion of Clark and Brennan (how do we know that grounding criteria are mutually manifest?) and Diderichson (how do we know that ways of extending context are mutually manifest?). But the question of locality remains: how does metadiscourse help internet users account for the variety and complexity of local subjects and contexts encountered online?

It does so, first, by allowing those who produce or circulate netiquette discourse to assert “where they are.” One of the frequently-reproduced rules from netiquette “guru” Virginia Shea book *Netiquette* is in fact the rule “Know Where You are in Cyberspace.” Shea’s advice reminds us that shared understandings of the local setting are central to shared notions of appropriate behavior.

### Netiquette varies from domain to domain

What’s perfectly acceptable in one area may be dreadfully rude in another. For example, in most TV discussion groups, passing on idle gossip is perfectly permissible. But throwing around unsubstantiated rumors in a journalists’ mailing list will make you very unpopular there.

And because Netiquette is different in different places, it’s important to know where you are. (sic)

Uptakes of Shea's rule suggest that this concern with setting resonates with other users. This rule is repeated on webpages and blogs across the world, and adapted by local authors. Authors counsel "know where you are in cyberspace" before explaining the rules of the local forum, listserv, or newsgroup. Knowing where we are, we may better understand the self-presentation of users in that locality.

In producing or reproducing netiquette discourse, internet users can assert locality—whether that be the locality of the nation ("The Internet is anonymous and electronic but, culturally, it is a genuine microcosm of any city in America" (Laws, 1999)) or of an online community (the blogosphere, Usenet, or a particular forum). For example, the following blog post about blogosphere etiquette, "When is the blogosphere (not) like a dog park?" asks whether participants in the acts of blogging, blog reading, and blog commenting should be loyal to one clear set of community rules. The blogger describes an encounter between regular users of a dog park she visits and a new user who breaks the tacit rules of the dog park:

The park users were amazingly clear about the community rules--and were very clear about communicating them to this potential new member of the group of people who brought their dogs to the park....It struck me as well that these kinds of clear community rules are what the blogosphere doesn't have. Or if they exist, they are not clearly posted--instead we have seismic waves of posts and comments on hot topics. People express outrage, there are discussions, and then things settle down. Or not. (Mernit, June 16, 2004)

With or without "clear community rules," Mernit asserts the blogosphere as a locality of its own, a place with characteristic behaviours that belong to it.

Second, netiquette allows individuals to assert *their relationship to the local*. Richard Rorty, in his work on cosmopolitanism and “justice,” suggests that we act according to loyalties which expand and contract according to threats and challenges (1998, 46). We might usefully think of locality—including local knowledge—as something to which we have variable loyalty. These “expanding and contracting loyalties” confirm Featherstone’s observation about the “sedimented ... taken-for-granted knowledge and beliefs” of locality that

the articulation of these beliefs and sense of the particularity of the local place will tend to become sharpened and more well-defined when the locality becomes locked into power struggles and elimination contests with its neighbours. In such situations we can see the formation of a local culture in which the particularity of its own identity is emphasized. (1996, p.55)

Loyalty to local knowledge—our willingness to put local knowledge and standards above others, and to reproduce those even in the face of our own doubts about them—may become sharpened and narrowed in response to perceived threats. They will also vary according to ideologies of the local (for example, strong nationalism, celebration of globalization, and so on) that influence how threats and challenges are perceived and how openness to difference is valued. Through netiquette, one may make a bid for local ways of doing and being, asserting one’s loyalty to that locality (“This is how locals do things here.”) Alternatively, one’s netiquette metadiscourse might suggest one is a seasoned traveler to other localities (a kind of cosmopolite), or that one has full citizenship in more than one locality.

*Other Metadiscourse, Other Lines: Canadian Connectivity and Expertise*

Finally, in drawing attention to the importance of locality, netiquette also reminds us that it is not the only metadiscursive resource that instructs users in face-work and relevance online. The injunction to “know where you are in cyberspace” also reminds us of the presence of other “wheres,” other social identities informing what we know and expect others to know. An online forum in a “crafters” community may indeed have a culture and conventions that are “local” to that community. But our estimations of people’s knowledge and perception in such forums may also be informed by what we know about their membership in other localities. For example, in the Canadian section of such an online forum, or at a Canadian destination like the *Chatelaine Magazine* website bulletin boards, the value, knowledge, and practices of those communities will also be informed by members’ estimation of each others’ “Canadianness.” It is not enough that users have an understanding of social identities like “experienced netizen,” “newbie,” “serious blogger,” “forum junkie,” and of the kinds of expertise and responsibilities they bear; nor is it enough for relevance to understand grounding constraints or augmentations available in an online “location” (to know that blogs and forums link to author profiles, for example). When assessing how their interlocutors will be impacted by new kinds of physical and linguistic copresence, internet users also base their assessment on “local knowledge” of subjects’ use of technology—for example, how Canadians use technology, or how teens, women, rural people do so.

How does such local knowledge accumulate? If such “encyclopaedic entries” allow us to mutually recognize how different kinds of consciousness are embedded in particular ways of “knowing” the internet, how are such entries written? Such local

knowledge is in part produced by other metadiscourse about CMD. Examining Canadian metadiscourse in reports from Canada's national newspaper *The Globe and Mail* about specifically Canadian internet users suggests how metadiscourse about national internet use also informs the self-presentations that readers recognize online and draw on in estimating technology's effects on what others can know and perceive. Looking at this body of metadiscourse highlights how expectations about what knowledge can be perceived or inferred by readers will attach in part to geopolitical/ imagined community localities.

Analysis of articles from 2000 to 2008—a period in which many functions of networked computers, such as email, became web-based, and new developments like blogs and social networking sites emerged, reveals common themes. One of the most prevalent preoccupations is with Canadian “connectivity”: the numbers and types of Canadians using the Internet, the number of Canadians using broadband services versus dial-up services, and the accessibility of wireless internet services. In *The Globe and Mail* between 2001 and 2004 in particular, a narrative of increasing connectivity unfolds. Canadian internet users, this metadiscourse informed readers, were now coming from populations (female, elderly, small town) considered “late adopters.” In 2000, for instance, *The Globe and Mail* reported that “Canadian Internet use keeps climbing” (Dixon, Nov 17, 2000), in 2001, that “Canadian, U.S. women lead Web use: study” (Aug 2, 2001), and, perhaps most tellingly, that a “68-year-old retired math and physics teacher and full-time gadfly from Canning, N.S.” was under fire from the Chief Electoral Officer for posting by-election results before polls closed in other time zones (Greenspon, Oct 24, 2000). Encountering the “Canadian” user online, this metadiscourse suggested, one

could not assume that such a user was not female, elderly, or rural. Neither could one assume that female or elderly Canadian users would have limited skills or use the internet for limited purposes, as attested to by the activities of the retired Nova Scotia gadfly. Nor could one assume that such users would not be in the background, unseen participants and potential readers.

High speed connectivity becomes an important theme in the narrative of Canadian connectivity, building an image of the Canadian user who has, or wants to have, a greater capability to download graphics, videos and audio files, and to run multiple web-based applications. Readers were instructed in 2001, for example, that more Canadians than previously would soon have high speed internet:

A million Canadian households plan to upgrade their Internet connection from dial-up service to higher-speed connections in the next six months, a recent market research study suggests. (Feb 15, 2001)

The image of the Canadian user which emerges is of an enthusiastic and connected user with a great deal expected to be knowable or perceptible to him or her by virtue of both connectivity and expertise. In 2003, the *Globe* reported on further jumps in connectivity (“Two thirds of Canadians surf the Net” (Dec 22, 2003) and “Canadians connect at high speed” (Ebner, Sep 17, 2003)), but also reminded readers of differences within the nation between urban and rural users: “Bell eyes Internet in rural Que” (Ebner, Dec 3, 2003). 2004 saw reports of increased bandwidth and the emerging promise of wireless services: “Broadband use up sharply among firms” (Bloom, Sep 28, 2004), and “AOL Canada testing wireless Internet access” (Mar 11, 2004). At the same time, the *Globe* reported in 2004 “Dial up holds its own” (Aug 12, 2004)—an important adjustment to the local

image of one's Canadian interlocutor. That is, he/she is more likely to have high levels of bandwidth, but since dial-up still has many subscribers, it cannot be assumed that he/she can always be able to perceive or understand visual and auditory features in the environment of the kind that might provide a kind of physical copresence (for example, audio, video, or picture files, or HTML in emails).

Reports also began to cover the kinds of activities in which Canadian users were engaging, suggesting not only connectivity but Canadian confidence in CMD and expertise in online interaction. Readers were told, for example, that increasing numbers of Canadians were using online dating services, as in the report of a 29-year old drawn into online dating because all her friends were doing it; the woman found that her suitors were quite competent with the new communications technologies online ("Soon enough, men from cyberspace were pursuing the Toronto nanny with instant messages and e-mails") (Chu, Feb 13, 2003). Canadian expertise also appeared in reports that Canadians were shopping much more online but were savvy to the potential dangers: "the vast majority of shoppers continue to have "reservations" about sending their banking information over the Internet" (Bloom, Dec 12, 2003).

With this higher bandwidth, greater level of expertise, and access to wireless service come implications for what we might expect of the Canadian user encountered online. No longer, such metadiscourse implied, was the Canadian user the neophyte or "newb" of the 1993 CBC report seen in Chapter One. In terms of "physical copresence," we might have reason to expect that many visual and auditory cues online (such as photos, gifs, sound files, videos, Flash, and html in email) might indeed be part of Canadians' cognitive environments—they might extend physical copresence in new

ways. In practical terms, one could insert a picture into an email to such a recipient, expecting it to open automatically (or at least expecting the user to know to open it, and to be able to open it easily), with the single line “What do you think of this?” and expect your utterance to meet the guarantee of relevance. An alternative email might look something like this: “I found this picture and thought of you. If it doesn’t open automatically, cut and paste the URL into your browser to view it. Then tell me what you think of the picture. Isn’t it funny?” Estimating mutual cognitive environments incorrectly violates the guarantee of relevance. Not only this, it has implications for the image of the subject being addressed and the sociality fostered: in the first case, the addressee is assumed to be web savvy; in the second, emphatically not. Estimating incorrectly in either case is potentially insulting to the addressee and establishes different relations between writer and reader.

### *Canadians and Overhearers*

Finally, we can also ask what such metadiscourse reports about Canadian knowledge of and attitudes toward people who are potentially listening in on their conversations online. As we saw in the coffee shop, participants in conversation often take into account problems like the possibility of eavesdroppers and overhearers—lowering their voices, casting warning glances at their conversation partners, using metaphors to talk discreetly about a sensitive topic, or talking in such a way as to trick such eavesdroppers or overhearers. Clark and Carlson’s description of “audience design” stresses that speakers are always taking into account different categories of participants: the addressee, participants (those ratified but not necessarily being addressed), and overhearers. The advice to “lurk” in newsgroups and on bulletin boards before

participating not only has implications for linguistic copresence but also raises a key problem for both face-work and relevance: how to account for interlocutors who cannot be seen, but who we may imagine are there.

From observation of the physical environment and previous experience of coffee shops, for example, one knows roughly how far away others must be before they are able to hear one's conversation. One learns over time who can hear, and whom one is expected to treat as a potential overhearer; for example, if Peter and his wife were trying to have a baby, and Peter's wife wanted to tell him "According to my charts, today is a good day to try for the baby," she might know to tell him at a table in the corner rather than near the front of the lineup—especially if the cappuccino machine wasn't generating background noise. Looking around and drawing on past experience, one can also estimate who might be able to overhear even if those people cannot be seen; for example, sitting in a dessert shop where patrons sit in back-to-back booths with high banquet walls, one might not see that one's teaching assistant was sitting next door able to overhear, but one might think twice before talking about how boring that teaching assistant was because she might be in the next-door booth.

Interlocutors online are faced with new questions issuing from changes to copresence: without physical copresence or past experience, how do we estimate who might be around to listen in, and how do we know our ways of proceeding in such situations are known or perceptible by others? Is my attitude toward overhearers and eavesdroppers—my sense of responsibility to them vis-à-vis facework and relevance—clear to my interlocutors? These kinds of question are not new—we might think of telephone users' decisions about audience design using the "party line"—but are more

fraught in CMD. The growing popularity in Canada of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, beginning in 2006, led to significant news coverage of how Canadian users manage key elements of both audience design and face-work, and suggests how expectations regarding the mutual manifestness of dealing with overhearers may attach to users' self-presentations as "Canadians." Reports in the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and *Vancouver Sun* beginning in 2006 have informed readers of the kinds of people and the range of purposes they could expect of *Canadian* social networking site users. These have often underlined the "Canadian-ness" of practices by comparing Canadian social networking practices with American ones and drawing out areas of difference.

Reports of Facebook use for job search and political campaigning have shown Canadians as savvy in manipulating the potential for "private" discourse to be read by overhearers—and distinguished how Canadians take advantage of these possibilities differently from Americans. For example, we learn of Facebook being used by youth campaigners and senior politicians, as in the story of youth campaigners for Liberal leadership candidate Michael Ignatieff. Youth campaigners set up Facebook "groups" to attract the attention of friends to Ignatieff's campaign (Thomson, 2006). Such groups attract people by invitation but also through Facebook users "overhearing" (by looking at a friend's profile page, or via an "update" page) that friends have joined such a group. Thomson's report showcases youth campaigners' skillful manipulation of these Facebook features allowing readers to "overhear" what their friends are doing.

Users can see on their page what groups their friends have been linked with, and this trickle-down marketing dynamic has attracted users who normally shun politics, youth campaigners contend.

Young Canadian users, readers learned, were aware of the complex private/public nature of social networking pages and at ease with designing utterances for both addressees and overhearers.

One theme of articles about social networking is Facebook's potential for feeding information to overhearers—and the ways this potential might be taken up by Canadians. A 2007 article entitled "FakeYourSpace to the rescue for 'cyberlosers'" (Slotnik), reported to Canadian readers on a new service based in San Diego that sets up social networking profiles with attractive, successful-looking "friends" in order to make the profiles of "cyberlosers" look more impressive. The service exists because people are using social networking sites to appear sociable and popular to potential employers (who, other articles tell readers, go to blogs and MySpace pages to check out prospective employees.) A year later, we learn that Canadian Facebook expertise has spread: almost three million Canadians (including the successful Liberal leader candidate, Stéphane Dion, with 8,296 Facebook friends, and other Canadian politicians with "more friends than some cities have Facebook users") are on Facebook, which is ranked in popularity as a "national passion" with "hockey and Tim Hortons coffee." Another 2007 article went so far as to refer to Canada as "Facebook Nation" (*National Post*, 2007). Both of these articles underscore the image of the Canadian internet user as a knowledgeable manager of CMD, self, and sociality. "Facebook Nation" (*National Post*, 2007) lauds Facebook's privacy controls and implies they are especially useful for Canadian users, who would not

be likely to broadcast their utterances without the ability to control who could “hear” what. These two latter articles are especially revealing for their suggestion that privacy is a Canadian value/priority—and therefore, we might infer, informing their expectations of Canadian users.

While Canadian enthusiasm for and savvy about with social networking sites is clear from such articles, Canadian difference from Americans with regard to how to take advantage of the potential for manipulating overhearers is less clear. Canadian attitudes toward such manipulation emerge in these articles as uncertain or in flux. The “Fake Your Space” service is described in some detail along with similar services, but the practice’s relationship to Canadian social networkers is ambiguous: the article does not describe Canadians using such manipulative services, but neither does it portray the practice as something that *Americans* do, or as a function of American culture or values. As well, while youth campaigners take advantage of indirect marketing through Facebook, feeding information indirectly using their own personal networks, Canadian politicians, we learn, are less likely to set up their own Facebook pages where they can, ostensibly, directly address an audience of “friends.” Politicians were less likely to take direct advantage of this opportunity for manipulating audience design through social networking sites. We learn that Canadian politician Ignatieff (who had been living and teaching in the United States) is “virtually alone among major Canadian politicians in this regard, but the practice is growing south of the border” and that “During the recent United States mid-term election campaign, Facebook allowed free profiles for all Congressional and gubernatorial candidates” (Thomson, 2006).

### *Conclusion*

Accounting for self and other in the pragmatics of our utterances (in our use of definite reference, indefinite pronouns, and so on), we must account for shared consciousness of the local, of technology, and of social roles and relations. The stereotypical images of local users emerging from metadiscourse are important not because they accurately reflect true facts and figures about local users but because they allow interlocutors to proceed with confidence that they can know and be known online even when local borders may seem to break down or become moot in online environments. Acknowledging the role that face-work plays in the cognitive choices described by relevance theory draws attention to the important and unique role that metadiscourse plays in instructing internet users on how to design and interpret utterances in the face of new conditions of copresence and locality. As interlocutors strive to meet the guarantee of relevance, they may not have access to an accurate estimate of what is “mutually manifest”—what is mutually perceptible or inferable to themselves and their fellow interlocutors. But through metadiscourse about technologies and their users, they can flesh out their knowledge of types and localities enough to proceed with some confidence.

To a certain extent, perhaps metadiscourse has always offered this service in the face of new technologies and new social settings. Etiquette literature, in responding to such changes, has assured readers that *recognizing* others in the face of social mixing, anonymity, and so on is still possible. Typically, this “recognition” has been considered in terms of face-work and politeness—and more recently in discussions of anonymity and reduced social cues. But I have demonstrated in this chapter that “recognizing” others

according to images drawn in metadiscourse also offers another function—to inform how users account for self and other at a pragmatic level.

Moreover, I have shown that public, user-generated metadiscourse in particular represents a significant development. Netiquette discourse offers a new and robust way of asserting locality (and one's relationship to the local) in the face of challenges to self and sociality. This strategy of managing self, sociality, and locality through metadiscourse is available on a scale and with a publicness and permanence that it has not been in the past. Producing and circulating netiquette discourse allow participants to establish where they are "located," regardless of whether that location is "real" or "virtual," and to assert their identity in relation to that location (they are hosts, visitors, cosmopolitan residents, "born and raised" locals).

Chapter Three: The Homeless Blog: Negotiating Local Consensus  
About Genre Innovation

Five months ago, Barbieux, started a Web log about his life ([TheHomelessGuy.net](http://TheHomelessGuy.net)). His goals for the "blog" were modest. Mainly, he wanted to show people a different side to homelessness.

...

The blog started as a whim. He'd heard about *blogging*, *the diarist-style writing that has swept the Web*, through friends. (emphasis mine)

(Humphrey, 2003, Mar. 17)

A few weeks ago, Anya Peters was homeless and living in a car, .... Her contact with the outside world was through *an online diary*.

But this *blog*, published under the name of Wandering Scribe, was picked up by readers around the world and has provided a remarkable way out of her homelessness. She has written her own *escape story*.

The story of her homelessness and her previous life is going to be turned into a book, with a publishing deal signed and the hardback scheduled to reach the bookshops next Spring. (emphasis mine)

(Coughlin, 2006, May 31)

[Gary] Trudeau draws a street person going to collect his e-mail at the public library, where addresses had been handed out free to the homeless. Looking for potential employers' responses to his job resume, he posts an address that puts the hype about the universal democracy built into the technoscientific information system into perspective: `lunatic@street_level`.

(Haraway, 1997, 6)

*Genre as Action, Genre as Local Knowledge*

Gary Trudeau's comic places a street person at a public library computer terminal.

This is a not-unfamiliar image of North American readers whose libraries often provide Internet access and shelter from inclement weather to any local resident. Walking into a public library and seeing a "street person" at such a library terminal, you might fairly

easily imagine the kinds of writing he or she might be producing, or information that he or she might be seeking. Imagine for a moment though that you are not in a library but a coffee shop—not the neighbourhood coffee shop where you ran into your colleague and his wife, but a coffee shop in another city where you are on vacation. You see a man in his late forties, presentable but weather-beaten and carrying enough possessions that it occurs to you he is homeless. He is typing on a laptop computer; he also appears to download pictures or video from a digital camera. As you walk behind him, you see he is online, apparently using the wireless Internet access provided by the coffee shop. From the amount and type of activity you observe, something more is going on than a search for information: something is being composed, and edited.

This is a scene less familiar than the one in Trudeau's comic, challenging expectations of how homeless people use computers and what kinds of writing they might engage in. The man has equipment we might not expect—a laptop, digital camera, wireless card—and the expertise to use it. The setting, too, is different: because the man has his own computer, and one that is wireless-enabled, he is in the coffee shop rather than the library where his activities would be perhaps more recognizable in the stereotypical terms of Trudeau's comic. Apart from his physical appearance, the man in the coffee shop writing on his laptop could be anybody—an IT tech updating his personal blog, a guy posting items for sale on EBay or Craigslist, and writing a catchy ad for them, an advocate writing postings for the listserv or Facebook group he moderates, a freelance writer working on a story, and so on. Because we have guessed that he is homeless, these seem less likely. But then again, this is not the library (where we have some experience of seeing homeless people using computers, and some ability to judge what kinds of

writing they are engaging in), but the coffee shop, a different setting for different kinds of people and activities. Neither is this our local coffee shop, or our local city, where we can feel comfortable picking up on signals, reading signs of activity, guessing at background stories. Perhaps we have misrecognized the signs of homelessness, or perhaps homelessness here is characterized by different conditions. Perhaps our expectations of what kinds of writing are likely or possible expand here, to account for other possibilities than the ones we are familiar with from our own local settings.

Online, we might encounter this same man by encountering the writing that he is producing: his weblog, or blog, his EBay page, his MySpace page, or his articles written for an online magazine. In these writings, he identifies himself as having struggled with homelessness through his life—much of his writing online addresses homelessness as a social issue in his city and the United States more broadly, as well as his need for social connection and support in finding food, clothing, and shelter. As in the coffee shop, he is identifiable as a homeless person, but the kinds of writing he does challenge expectations of how homeless people use computers and what kinds of writing they produce.

Encountering such writing online challenges expectations also because of the multiple localities we have to take into account. His blog tells us he lives in Nashville (perhaps homelessness is different in Nashville?). The levels of activity surrounding his blog, such as comments from other readers, links to his blog from other blogs, and news coverage the blog has garnered, suggests that he is also firmly located in the network of blogs often referred to as the blogosphere (perhaps we need to see the writer, and the writing, differently in this setting). Finally, his blog itself acts as a kind of locality, a home base to which readers and writer can return, engaging with the blogger or with other readers; we

might not choose to belong here ourselves (if we do not, and we are only “passing by,” perhaps our judgment of the writer and the writing is not important).

Going online, what kind of writing does a person traditionally excluded from forms of public writing and speech feel are open to him or her? What does such writing appear to enable? Encountering these kinds of writers and writing online, how will readers respond? How do readers and writers take into account local expectations of who they are, what they need, and what they might do with writing? Until this point in my discussion, my concern has been with the ways writers and speakers account for themselves and others in pragmatic terms. In the next two chapters, I move to an examination of another way that they do so, through the *genres* or discourse types used to take action in the world. Genres—that is, local knowledge of discourse as action—inform how we imagine that we and others—homeless people, activists, politicians, storytellers, women, scientists—can act *in* the world (as kinds of subjects) and *on* the world (as subjects and as agents).

Lloyd Bitzer’s early contribution to our understanding of genre as action posited a “rhetorical situation”—a situation in which a socially recognized exigence, or “imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer, 1968, 6), is seen as able to be modified through “fitting” (6) discursive responses. Bitzer portrayed rhetorical language as shared knowledge of how to use language to act on such exigencies; he called on Bronislaw Malinowski’s observations of Trobriand fishermen’s practiced and economical communication on their boats to make the point that every word and every call was communally recognized as bending toward one end— in his example, the community’s catching of fish. Early rhetorical genre theorists, building on Bitzer, showed us more of

what “rhetorical language”—to use his term—looked like as action: it was not only language that could meet an exigence, but “a complex, and amalgam, a constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1979, 18). We could observe relationships between these constellations of elements and local (as in historical, or geopolitical) conditions.

Recognizing genres as typified strategies, constellations commonly perceived as fitting responses, these early descriptions of genre exposed genre as the kind of “taken-for-granted knowledge and beliefs” that Mike Featherstone describes as building up over time in a local culture.

A local culture may be a common set of work and kinship relationships which reinforce the practical, everyday lived culture which is sedimented into taken-for-granted knowledge and beliefs. (1996, 52).

Carolyn Miller’s 1984 definition of genre as “social action,” a formative definition in the new rhetorical genre studies in which this chapter and the next are rooted, shows genre as not only a constellation that can be observed in and traced across local skies, but also as one which produces (as anthropologist Appadurai puts it in his study of modernity) “local subjects, actors who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbors, friends, and enemies” (1996, 180). Miller shows us that genre is this kind of local knowledge when she defines “exigence” as “a form of *social* knowledge—a *mutual construing* of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need” (30) (emphasis mine). When we learn a genre, Miller observes, we learn “what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another, instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take

on an official role, account for progress in achieving goals” (Miller, 1984, 165). That is, we learn what roles we may take on in a situated community. Subsequent studies have further shown how genres are produced in conditions of sociality (in “discourse communities” (Swales, 1990) or “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991), or in conditions where sociality is implicit (“activity systems” (Engestrom, 1987) and “genre systems” (Bazerman, 1994)). Genre as local knowledge is thus produced via local experiences of rhetorical exigence, of historical and geopolitical contexts, and of sociality.

I turn to genre for three reasons. First, to understand self and sociality in CMD, we need to consider the discourses of online *action* that also motivate modern subjects. Discourses of online action tell us what people *do* (or can do) because of the internet. Such discourses of action ranging from the dystopian (“cyberbullying,” cyberterrorism” and so on) to the utopian (such as online activism, the rescuing of endangered languages, and so on), and some, like “hacktivism,” in between, propel subjects toward new possibilities and away from others. Second, many hopes and fears regarding self and sociality online rely on assumptions about genre that need to be examined. Implicit in hopes pinned to “access” and “voice,” for instance—discussed in Chapter One—are assumptions that discourse-as-action issues from access to the means of publication—an assumption that the observations of genre theory bely. Third, genre theory has a longstanding interest in the relationship between subjectivity, community, and action in the world that can both inform and be informed by a study of locality in online genre. CMD and local adaptations to CMD raise questions for genre theory that are pressing:

questions about a) CMD's effects on genres and b) the adequacy of current concepts and models for understanding genre as local knowledge.

### *Genre and Civic Action Online*

Since their introduction, email, blogs, and other internet technologies have generated an enduring climate of optimism about new rhetorical opportunities for marginalized people: opportunities for reaching hard-to-access readers and listeners, for bringing new voices and discussion to the public sphere, for writing one's way out of difficult circumstances, for writing one's way into different subject positions. Rhetors and readers see the internet as a field of generic innovation, where features like the speed and low cost of transmission and the absence of face-to-face contact offer ways to overcome constraints faced by existing print and oral genres—or to inflect genres with new characteristics and purposes.

The discourse of new and improved opportunities for both citizens and government to act *civically* online is an especially enduring and generative one, and therefore my focus in this chapter and the next, both of which examine civic genres. While earlier utopianism about the internet has been tempered, optimism about new opportunities for citizenship, electronic democracy and e-government continue to motivate advocacy groups, policy makers within governments, software developers, and everyday people, guiding how they spend resources of time and money. But there is tension between new conditions for subjectivity, new conditions for democratic action, and new forces acting on local knowledge. The combination of the discourse of improvement with a) the social motives associated with discourses of democracy and citizenship and b) technological developments like blogging software, signature

authentication, and so on creates new challenges that intersect with but also go beyond my earlier discussions of audience design, face-work, and meta-discourse.

Thus, what I am calling civic genres are particularly important to examine. Civic genres are those which set out to do civic action such as advocating for others or promoting democratic discourse—these are genres through which subjects can act as citizens and be recognized as doing so. We might include in this group genres like the street newspaper, the political pamphlet, the letter to one's Member of Parliament, the World Vision-type television ad soliciting donations, and so on; we can also include civic genres taken up online to address issues of social justice, such as the electronic petition, the activist website, or the social advocacy video game,<sup>21</sup>—genres which appear able to overcome constraints posed by space and time, economics, prejudice, laziness, and so on facing civic discourse. This chapter examines the advent and reception of a new civic genre, the "homeless blog," while Chapter Four examines electronic petitioning and its relationship to the petitions historically delivered to the Canadian House of Commons.

Before I turn to these genres, I outline proposals regarding civic action online, proposals which represent both theories of CMD to be tested (can the internet really usher in new modes of democracy?) and broad social motives informing responses to civic genres online (commitment to "e-democracy" as a reason to write, a reason to read, a reason to link to a blog by a homeless writer).

Proponents of the internet's positive impact on democracy—and on related values like equality and diversity—come with several proposals, some focused on citizen

---

<sup>21</sup>Social advocacy video games, a type of "persuasive game," are created on the premise that by experiencing and learning about a situation such as homelessness or global hunger in a game format, players can be persuaded to see situations differently and then to move toward positions of social advocacy. See, for example, Terry Lavender's game "Homeless: It's No Game" (<http://www.homelessgame.net/>) and the United Nations World Food Program game "Food Force" (<http://www.food-force.com/>).

subjects, some on institutions and their relationships with citizen subjects, and some on the “public sphere.” Those focused on the subject propose that the internet can foster increased access to *voice* and thus to the subject position of “citizen”; as I have outlined in Chapter One, these often rest upon beliefs about access to publishing and/or publics. Within rhetorical genre theory itself, similar proposals have been offered. Charles Bazerman sees rhetors as able to take on new subject positions through online acts of discourse. This is because people “develop and form identities through participation in systems of genres within ordered activity systems” (2002, 15), including the genres and activity systems of activist groups which have “provided a major site for the development of individuals as citizens” (26). The web, Bazerman suggests, introduces new kinds of communication, with the potential for “changing the total ecology of political communication” (26), and, by implication, for providing new opportunities for rhetors to develop identities as citizens.

Proposals focused on institution suggest that by using ICTs (information and communications technologies), particularly internet technologies, governments can increase citizen *engagement* and *participation*—both enhancing the process of democracy and enriching the subject’s experience of citizenship. Sometimes described under the rubric of “e-government,” in which governments “use ICTs to restructure existing institutions of government” (Bell, Loader, Pleace, & Schuler, 2004, 71), such proposals focus on values of *efficiency* and *transparency* in addition to *engagement* and *participation*. E-government initiatives can make government more efficient and more responsive to citizens’ needs by allowing them to get a SIN card online, to email their

MPs, to petition the government electronically, and so on—providing both the services and the avenues for communication allotted to the citizen.

Occasionally making proposals about both the subject and the institution, others promote “e-democracy,” or the “innovative use of new media to significantly enhance democratic governance by facilitating *more direct participation* by citizens in the political decision-making arena” (Bell, Loader, Pleace, & Schuler, 2004, 71) (emphasis mine)—rather than “e-government.” Such approaches associate participation with values of *active production* and direct control; that is, according to this perspective, through technology the internet promotes more “participatory democracy,” more active roles for citizens as producers rather than consumers of policy (Bell, Loader, Pleace, & Schuler, 2004.) A report which emerged from work on the early Scottish Parliament (research was commissioned by the All-Party Consultative Steering Group), for example, examining government websites both for web design and for the democratic model they follow, finds that “cyber-democracy” fosters a hybrid of different models of democracy. “The Internet is thereby thought capable,” they suggest,

of facilitating challenge to the monopoly of existing political hierarchies and revitalising citizen-based democracy through amplifying the power of grassroots groups to gather critical information, organize political action, sway public opinion and guide policy making. It promises, too, the provision of opportunities for direct citizen expressions of policy preferences and for significantly closer and more direct communication between elected members and citizens. (Taylor & Burt, 1999, 504)

Dahlberg (2001) also notes the range of democratic models informing policy makers and other players, citing the dominant power of liberal individualist rhetoric but also the relevance of the rhetoric of communitarianism and deliberative democracy. Finally, as I have outlined in Chapter One, still others propose that the internet will enhance democracy by allowing public sphere discourse to flourish through diversity of voices and forums for discussion.

Such proposals have not been accepted without question by observers. One problem raised is the potential for empowered citizens to get “out of hand.” Macintosh Davenport, Malina, and Whyte (2001), in communications research on electronic governance undertaken for the International Teledemocracy Centre, propose that if government is informed by the same trend affecting commerce—consumers taking on role as producers—this can be potentially problematic. Citizens-as-producers may take matters into their own hands: “while governments may be seen as (electronic) providers of services and deliverers of policy, citizens may choose to seek ownership of service provision and policy making for themselves” (Macintosh, Davenport, Malina, & Whyte, 2001). They cite the potential, for instance, for “hacktivism,” the politically-motivated use of computer programming skill in actions or campaigns against the targets of activist groups. As Sandor Vegh (2003) points out in his discussion of hacktivist campaigns such as the pro-Zapatista group the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (whose performances included overloading the servers of anti-Zapatista groups) (76), hacktivism’s effects to empower are the subject of debate: “Hacktivism has been diversely labeled as online advocacy, virtual direct action, electronic civic disobedience, performance art, or cybercrime, cyberterrorism, and cyberwar, depending on the point of view” (83).

A related problem that Macintosh, Davenport, Malina, & Whyte identify is that activities comprising e-democracy may run counter to existing modes of government, while e-government initiatives may simply solidify existing structures and limits. In this way, they may in fact resist possibilities for new modes of citizenship or democracy—possibilities like those in which citizens “seek ownership of service provision and policy making for themselves” that others have identified as a danger. Scholars optimistic about CMD and democracy, like the group of American rhetoricians who came together in 2001 to make recommendations for the role of rhetoric instruction in guiding the future of online writing (Geisler *et al.*, 2001), have contended that “ITexts<sup>22</sup> have initiated social and material changes that appear to be altering the very character of texts and the interactions of those who use them” (270). The possibility that e-government initiatives may reinforce existing structures and limits suggests that e-government initiatives may forestall the internet’s potential for altering “the total ecology of political communication” (Bazerman, 2002, 26). Such cautions about e-governments’ conservative effect on structures on limits suggests that e-government might have a centripetal effect on the potential of online genres to introduce new modes of citizenship.

Finally, critics have suggested that other constraints on public sphere discourse may limit participation—regardless of optimistic initiatives or teaching agendas. Some theories of public sphere discourse likewise address “participation” as a problem, pointing to the need to understand constraints on public sphere discourse. Jodi Dean, for instance, argues against a theory of the internet as public sphere—whether approached as Habermas’ rational public sphere or Benhabib’s “friendly” space of “sociability”; she

---

<sup>2222</sup> “Information technologies with texts at their core—the blend of IT and texts that we call ITexts” (Geisler *et al.* 2001; 270)

calls instead for us to root our hopes in the ways that the internet can be a part of civil society, which “privileges the concrete institutions in which the subjects of politics come to practice, mediate, and represent their actions as political” rather than abstract political ideals, “norms of equality, inclusivity, publicity, rationality, and authenticity from a few, usually elite, social locations” (2001, 247). Through genre theory, we can extend Dean’s observation. The genres seen as properly part of “public sphere discourse”—speeches, editorials, letters to the editor, reasoned if passionate dinner party debate—are characterized by, and reproduce, those same abstract ideals; moreover, they are often genres that come easily to or seem most appropriate in the mouths of those in elite social locations.

Dean’s critique reminds us that expectations of appropriate public sphere discourse can in fact limit participation; “to territorialize cyberspace as the public sphere” she points out, “is to determine in advance *what sort of engagements and identities are proper to the political*” (2001, 246; emphasis mine). It sets up expectations that online discourse is political when it looks like those often elite genres. Calling cyberspace a “public sphere,” she cautions, thus invoking expectations of properly political genres, is therefore “to homogenize political engagement, neutralize social space, and sanitize popular cultures” (246). In genre theory’s terms, we risk missing genres that enact civil society because they are not like those we expect to hear in “public sphere discourse”—from homeless blogs to videos of nude protestors worldwide posted on YouTube to those who post comments on such blogs or videos (responding not only to the original author but to posts made by other visitors.)

Such a territorialization, moreover, configures those excesses of the Internet that resist compilation into a normative vision of the public sphere as *pathologies and exceptions* that do not apply to, that are outside of, that bound this public sphere and so continues to reassure the public sphere's claims to freedom and democracy.[9] (2001, 246) (emphasis mine)

The genres that internet users may take up in order to act civically online, that is, may be characterized as not civic at all. From this perspective, we need to ask whether the subjects that optimists see as able to take advantage of new access to media, publics, and so on have access to ratified ways of speaking and writing, not just to technology.

The social motives of access, voice, efficiency, participation, and debate bound up in discourses of “e-democracy,” “e-government,” and the “Internet as public sphere” thus encounter potential roadblocks. To recap: resistance to citizens’ attempts to produce rather than consume policy; e-government providing resistance to new modes of democracy; and the pathologization of civic discourse that falls outside “proper” discourse. Genre theorists’ observations underscore the need to examine these issues; observations about genre as a site of ideological struggle (for example, in Pare’s 2002 study of Inuit social workers whose reports struggle to match local values while meeting the demands of others who use those; and Berkenkotter’s similar observations (2001) about how therapists’ notes are influenced by the needs of others who will use the notes to meet different needs underscore the need to examine ideological struggle taking place in struggle over the right and wrong ways to write such texts. At the same time, genre theorists’ observations that genres may change, even fade away, call for us to look more closely at the dynamics of change and decline.

*The Homeless Blog: Negotiating Public Meta-Discourse*

The “homeless blog,” a blog written by a person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness, dealing explicitly with experiences and issues of homelessness, and the “electronic petition” represent two kinds of online civic action where rhetors act under the influence of such motives and therefore where we can observe how they negotiate the kinds of challenges summarized above. Both represent different possibilities for genre evolution: the homeless blog allows us to examine the emergence of a new genre, while the e-petition allows us to examine changes to a well-established genre. Looking at both of these possibilities for genre evolution reveals new ways of accounting for the negotiation of self and sociality via local genre knowledge.

The focus of this chapter is how rhetors and their readers negotiate public and permanent meta-discourse about new genres—public assertions or reflections about the types or genres of writing encountered online. Conditions influencing the homeless blog and genres like it—heightened vulnerability to competing conceptions of the rhetorical situation, an upsurge of public meta-generic activity, and exigencies of self-presentation—require a new way of theorizing *negotiations* over generic innovation and evolution. I have argued in Chapter Two for bringing Goffman’s theory of “face-work” to understanding how, through public metadiscourse that “locates” subjects, internet users negotiate new conditions affecting the pragmatics of audience design. I propose in this chapter that face-work is also a valuable addition to studies of genre—it helps us to account for how genres evolve in the face of public meta-genre, and what functions such meta-genre might serve. Face-work, I argue, offers rhetorical genre theory a way to

follow how readers and rhetors build, resist, and protect localized provisional agreements, “working consensus” (Goffman, 1959) about genres in these conditions.

*Diaries and Cardboard Signs: New Rhetorical Situations and “Antecedent Genres”*

In the terms provided by Lloyd Bitzer, internet users behave and talk as if something has changed in the “rhetorical situation.” As Donna Haraway’s description of Trudeau’s “comic” portrayal of the homeless email user suggests, technologies like email alter the rhetorical situation; they making existing genres like resumes and cover letters more viable for people without street addresses and for whom text may make a better impression than face-to-face contact. Blogging technologies alter the rhetorical situation by offering new genres as solutions. Homeless bloggers and their sympathetic readers have deemed the homeless blog a fitting response to existing exigencies of homelessness: the absence of a permanent and private home and material resources, policies failing to address the causes of homelessness and its remedies, and homeless people’s lack of meaningful connection with community and civil society. Through the homeless blog, bloggers can describe personal experiences, give advice, solicit aid, answer questions, encourage debate, interview other homeless people, draw attention to policy changes, and critique homeless services in ways not previously possible. These activities are newly viable because the Internet and blogging software offer the chance to speak publicly and garner publicity, the ability to hyperlink with influential texts such as newspaper articles, removal from face-to-face contact, and an environment where skilled narration of personal experience—especially of a unique personal story—confers new social capital. Kevin Barbieux’s *The Homeless Guy*, begun in Nashville in 2002, was the first homeless blog to receive significant attention for taking advantage of these opportunities; reporter

Jacob Ogles has called it, in *Wired Magazine*, "the most popular homeless blog on the web" (2006). Since the start of Barbieux's blog, many other homeless or formerly homeless people—like Anya Peters—have, in turn seeing the homeless blog as a fit response, begun writing their own homeless blogs: *Norsehorse's Old Home Turf*, *The Homeless Guy in NYC*, *View From the Sidewalk*, *Homeless in Abbotsford*, *Homeless in Long Beach*, *Jamie's Big Voice*, and a growing list of others.<sup>23</sup>

Their ambitions, however, are subject to contestation as they encounter competing constructions of the rhetorical situation which see homelessness as an exigence with a different range of fitting solutions: job-hunting, networking, and therapeutic genres, for instance. Other perspectives on the situation may contend that solutions to homelessness are not to be found in discourse at all—or that they are to be found in the discourse of people other than homeless people themselves: politicians, bureaucrats, ministers. The central problem the homeless blog raises is that writing or speaking in “new” ways may be understood in terms of already “known” or “understood” ways of writing or speaking—the ways we think people usually do or ought to proceed in such situations. That is, the homeless blog invites us to consider carefully the relationship between *writing subjects* (“homeless person,” “inmate,” “immigrant”), *new rhetorical*

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Homeless Guy* has been followed by homeless blogs in the United States, Britain, and Canada, including first-wave homeless blogs Vermont-based *Norsehorse's Old Home Turf* (Morgan Brown) and New York-based *The Homeless Guy in NYC* (James Christian). More recently, perhaps in response to renewed media and public discourse about the genre, another wave of homeless blogs has appeared and garnered attention in the media and in blogging circles. *View From the Sidewalk* chronicles the recent homelessness and recovery of Michael Brown and his family in North Carolina; *Homeless in Abbotsford* follows writer and homeless advocate James Breckenridge's experience of homelessness in Western Canada; *Homeless in Long Beach* contains “alyceclover's” memories and observations of homelessness in California. And they continue to emerge. Perhaps the most well-known since *The Homeless Guy* is *Jamie's Big Voice* out of Britain, whose name echoes the pioneer street paper *The Big Issue*. *Jamie's Big Voice* began when its author, James McCoy, was approached by homeless advocacy group Crisis and democracy advocacy group Hansard to write an “election blog” (McCoy, 2005, 4) during the 2005 British election, but McCoy decided to continue blogging after the election, asserting in his tagline that his blog is “A voice battling for homeless people. The blog does not stop just because the election is over.”

*opportunities* (in this case, opportunities afforded by technology,) and *older genres* considered analogous or parent genres. The relationship between online and offline genres has been a central concern of genre scholars and lay people asking whether genres will deteriorate online (Will the art of letter writing die?), whether online and offline genres are truly analogous (Is online news the same as offline news?), and how people learn to write online (How do we teach students or workers to write familiar genres using new technologies?). These new concerns—as I discuss more fully later in this chapter—carry on an older interest in genre studies in the relationship between old and new genres, a concern formulated in the early years of new rhetorical genre studies and recurring in subsequent discussions of genre hybridity, genre evolution, parent genres, and so forth.

In an important early study, “Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint” (1975), Kathleen Jamieson suggested that when people encounter a *new* rhetorical situation, one without a typified solution ready to hand, they turn to older rhetorical situations, drawing on the “antecedent” genre that worked in those situations. Jamieson was responding to the way that people taking up a genre noticed that “new” and “old” genres looked similar, and the fact that the appearance of similarity might affect their responses to others’ discourse. Jamieson’s observations are useful not only for thinking about new exigencies. They can also be useful, I suggest, for considering situations in which a need previously existed—and in which an event or development (like the development of new technologies) suggests new ways to meet those needs through writing and talk, for new “social actions” as Miller came to later describe genres (Miller 1984/1994). Jamieson’s key observation about antecedent genres was that they could constrain social action in the new rhetorical situation because traces of the old genre might be unsuited to their new

purpose. She observed, for instance, that Americans complained about the Congressional Reply to the President's State of the Union Address because they sensed that the antecedent (the British parliament's reply to the "King's Speech") was incommensurate with American political ideals (Jamieson, 1975, 406). Americans interpreted the new genre—the Congressional Reply—in terms of an older, familiar genre.

The possibilities for antecedent genres to act as a constraint on new discourse rest on the dynamics of genre recognition and “uptake.” Part of what we know about a genre is the kinds of responses it is likely to inspire; a protest sign might inspire discussion, media coverage, argument, or no response at all. These responses interpret the genre—in this case, seeing it as “protest” and responding accordingly. A response can help to identify that respondents have perceived an antecedent genre; in Jamieson’s example, people’s complaints signal the perception of the monarchical antecedent to the “President’s State of the Union Address.” Anne Freedman usefully proposes that the bi-directional relationship between a pair of texts (a text and its “uptake” or “interpretant text”) has the power to confirm or deny the status of a genre, to “block” its social action.<sup>24</sup>

...The text is contrived to secure a certain class of uptakes, and the interpretant, or the uptake text, confirms its generic status by conforming itself to this contrivance. It does so, by—say—“taking it as” an invitation or a request. By the same token, however, the uptake text has the power not to so confirm this generic

---

<sup>24</sup> To adapt Freedman’s own example of the last judicial execution in Australia, a court sentence is an “uptake” of the stories told in evidence, the personal memoirs, films, and newspaper stories of being involved in the court case are uptakes of the controversial sentence and punishment, and her own critical article is an uptake of this range of texts.

status, which it may modify minimally, or even utterly, by taking its object as some other kind. (2002, 40)

In other words, a text which takes up another text can significantly impact how the genre of the original text is understood.

We can see the socio-political implications of this dynamic, particularly for marginalized rhetors, in uptakes of Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchu's much-acclaimed autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984) telling the story of the horrors and hardships suffered by herself and her family in Guatemala. One uptake of the autobiography was Menchu's winning of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. Criticized in anthropologist David Stoll's 1999 *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* as boldly fraudulent in its details, the book has since had competing uptakes: some which reject its generic status as autobiography, instead dubbing it just another fake memoir, others (like the Nobel committee's decision not to rescind the award) which take it as an important narrative (even if not strictly "true" in the way we expect of autobiography) and representative voice in the struggle for peace. Both sets of uptakes impact what the text can (or cannot) do in the world. Importantly for genres like the homeless blog, by taking a new genre as simply an instance of an antecedent genre, rather than as something new, an interpretant text has the power to shut down possibilities for that new text. In this way, Freedman's theory of uptake recognizes the vulnerability of genre to local moments and responses, including responses which "take" a genre as being derived from an antecedent.

Arguably, genre innovations online are especially vulnerable to being "taken" as new versions of antecedent genres; definitions of online discourse have invariably tried to

explain the “new” in terms of the “old”—leading to explanations of the blog as a kind of online diary, for instance. “The politics of naming,” McNeill points out in her study of the blog/diary relationship, “are particularly potent when generic terrain is emerging, shifting, and unstable, as it was (and to some extent still is) online as the Web became an established discursive location” (forthcoming). She notes both the impulse to describe blogs as diaries, and bloggers, strongly invested in the idea of the blog as *new*, rejecting such characterizations (forthcoming). Uptakes of homeless blogs draw attention to a process of interpretation similar to that noted by Jamieson and McNeill; homeless blogs are often described in terms of antecedent or analogous genres and sometimes resist those characterizations. As with the complaints that Jamieson observed about the Congressional Reply, meta-discursive references to the antecedent genres at work in the homeless blog may challenge the genre’s status. Two examples from Kevin Barbieux’s blog show this dynamic at work. From the beginning, Barbieux asserts in his blog banner<sup>25</sup> and in blog posts that his purpose in blogging is to

relate to you the realities of homelessness. But there is certainly more to a homeless person than being homeless, and this may be the best thing this blog could accomplish - a greater awareness about the whole-ness of homeless people. Not every post will be about homelessness, but they will all be about a homeless person, me. For some people it will be their first experience with the "me" identity within a homeless person. Welcome to My world, a subsidiary of Our world.

He casts his blog as an autobiographical act (all his posts will be about himself), but in the service of advocacy (to show the “whole-ness” of homeless people.) Over time, in the

---

<sup>25</sup> This statement appeared in a sidebar (a portion of the blog on the side of the blog posts, that appeared no matter when readers visited). A version of this statement would later become the banner for his blog. Only in the past year has it ceased to be visible on the blog.

kinds of posts I've identified above—advice for non-homeless people, up-to-date commentary on municipal policies, and so on—*The Homeless Guy* expands its civic mandate beyond showing “the realities of homelessness” to proposing real changes in how communities deal with those realities. As such Barbieux's blog is an innovative, unanticipated use of the personal blog whose exigence, as Miller and Shepherd describe it, is “self-cultivation and validation” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004).<sup>26</sup> As Miller and Shepherd observe in 2004, the home page “is the immediate predecessor of the blog”; the personal blog, I would argue, is another online antecedent of the homeless blog.

Talk about the antecedent genres of *The Homeless Guy*, however, sometimes challenges this image of the genre. Barbieux's innovative use of the personal blog for advocacy has often been miscast as an “online diary.” Reminding us of the diary's “image problem” (it is “a form stereotyped as pedestrian, domestic, and—perhaps worst of all—feminine”), McNeill suggests bloggers may reject such miscasting as a threat to a blogging community ethos of novelty and exploration (forthcoming). An early *Salon.com* uptake of Barbieux's blog suggests how uptakes taking the blog as a diary may do more than threaten community ethos. Within two months of his beginning the blog, Barbieux attracted the attention of journalist Noah Shachtman, one of several journalists who would write about *The Homeless Guy*. When Shachtman reports Barbieux as having written that his “intention is to legitimize homeless people” (Shachtman, 2002, 1), he does acknowledge the social action to which Barbieux's blog aspires. However, Shachtman introduces *The Homeless Guy* as an “Internet diary,” beginning his article,

---

<sup>26</sup> In “Public engagements and public arrangements of blog genres” (2007), Kathryn Grafton and I explore how bloggers may address this exigence not just through community building (as Miller and Shepherd observe many bloggers proposing (2004)), but also by inserting themselves into the “publics” (Warner 2002) of other texts and reimagining those publics. In this way as well the homeless blog can be seen as an innovation on the personal blog.

If you want to know what cereal a total stranger eats for breakfast or how he feels about invading Iraq, there are hundreds of thousands of *Internet journals*, *popularly known as blogs*, waiting for you. But to find out where the best soup kitchen is in Nashville, Tenn., or how it feels to pick up trash until dawn for \$30, or what it's like to sleep in a '71 Ford Granada, you'll have to go to Kevin Barbieux's *Internet diary* for answers. (Shachtman, 2002, 1) (emphasis mine)

This meta-generic description of a blog as an "Internet diary" claims the diary as a key antecedent of the blog (in the rest of the article, Shachtman calls it a journal five times, and refers to it as a blog only twice). It also characterizes "Internet diary" as a text written by a stranger, full of mundane details and personal opinion, feelings, and experience.

While such texts might feed readers' prurient curiosity about others' personal habits or feelings, the diaries/journals that Shachtman describes do not commonly legitimize or even speak for the class of people to which the diarist belongs. Thus, although Shachtman's article gestures to the exigence that *The Homeless Guy* seeks to address, it firmly associates *The Homeless Guy* with an antecedent genre that is not associated with that exigence or ambition. It encourages readers to recognize Barbieux's homeless blog, that is, as something diary-like, a private recording of someone else's days and feelings that we are allowed to overhear and that might prove a novelty—rather than recognize it as a text speaking to the public about and on behalf of a marginalized group.

Schachtman's meta-generic characterization of *The Homeless Guy* as a diary/journal thus threatens to "block" the social action of the genre.

This process of interpreting antecedents of genres online, moreover, is ongoing. This is in part because "affordances" of the internet and digital text give rise to new

technologies—tagged photo streams on Flickr<sup>27</sup>, audio-blogging, “micro-blogging” services like Twitter<sup>28</sup>, and so on—which can be added to webpages, blogs, social networking sites, and other familiar kinds of texts. The #10 Downing St website (the website of the British Prime Minister), for instance, now shows YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter materials—making the webpage seem more like a TV station (with video “programming,” a photo album, and a daily personal log (with short, disconnected recordings of events through the day) than it did before. Such new technologies enable further innovation (texts can be more up-to-date, more searchable, more visual, more interactive) but also invite new comparisons between new kinds of writing and speaking online and more familiar, antecedent genres.

Building on psychologist J.J. Gibson’s 1977 work, Donald Norman offers the concept of “affordances” to explain how some objects and materials permit and therefore encourage particular actions that others do not. “[T]he term affordance,” he outlines, refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used .... A chair affords (“is for”) support and, therefore, affords sitting. A chair can also be carried. Glass is for seeing through, and for breaking. Wood is normally used for solidity, opacity, support, or carving. Flat, porous, smooth surfaces are for writing on. (2002, 9)

---

<sup>27</sup> A photo-based social networking service that allows users to post photos, “tag” photos with key words, and search for photos with tags of interest. Currently, for instance, one can “geotag” photos—that is, tag photos with their geographical location—and locate photos of a region taken by other users by clicking on a map.

<sup>28</sup> A social networking, “micro-blogging” service that allows users to instantly send short (140 character) updates via IM (instant messaging) or (SMS) short message service to their blog or to people who have signed up for the updates.

The internet offers many new affordances, chief among them digital text, software programs for sending digital text, software programs for quickly displaying changes to digital text, and programs which allow digital text to be linked with a unique user.

Understanding the affordances of objects and materials, Norman suggests, can help us to design things better. He gives the example of door handles, some of which afford pushing (flat bars, for instance) but not pulling. Having a better understanding of which type of handle permits and encourages pushing or pulling, he points out, we can make doors that are easier to open.

Norman's interest was in helping designers, but as Miller and Shepherd point out in "Questions for genre theory from the Blogosphere" (forthcoming), his observations about how affordances allow and foster some actions—how paper affords different activities than wood or glass—can also help us to understand the relationship between genre and medium. Affordances themselves, critically, do not *determine* users' actions or expectations, only guide them. Norman pointed out three kinds of constraints informing how we take up affordances: physical, logical, and cultural (1999, 40). Our perception and use of affordances, he pointed out, is guided by cultural constraints: we might be able to write on bark (it is hard and porous), but whether we will or not is also determined by cultural expectations of whether doing so would be convenient, would be rhetorically effective, would be legal, and so on.

Barbieux adopts technologically-enabled innovations in his blog; he draws on affordances to enhance the social action of his text in the same way one might use a new material or technological development to build a more durable billboard or more aerodynamic bicycle. When he does so, however, he faces reader reactions that interpret

these innovations in terms of analogous activities or antecedent genres in potentially constraining ways. After the blog's initial success in 2002, Barbieux added one such innovation, a "Paypal" button,<sup>29</sup> to his blog—a link which allowed visitors to make donations to Barbieux electronically. This significant innovation enabled Barbieux in theory to make money from writing—to *be* a writer in a way not usually permitted to homeless subjects (one of whose defining traits in stereotypical terms is unemployment and lack of industry).

The Paypal button was not a central feature of the blog, but the reader commentary it drew suggests that for some readers it coloured views of the blog overall. One interpretation of this innovation—including Barbieux's own—associated *The Homeless Guy* with literary blogs, whose writers, bloggers hoping to make money from their writing outside of established publishing channels, had already been accepting donations from readers. These uptakes described the PayPal button as a "tip jar" (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 19; Humphrey, 2003, Mar. 17), promoting a view of the blog as a performance or service warranting reward. Others who responded to the PayPal button addition—by emailing Barbieux and posting comments on the Web—cast *The Homeless Guy* as a kind of panhandling or "spanging" (spare changing). People publicly responded (for and against) to what they perceived as the electronic equivalent of the panhandler's sign or outstretched cup, in spite of the fact that Barbieux had, early on, explicitly criticized panhandlers as drug addicts, actively discouraging people from giving them money. One blogger, for instance, wrote of a homeless friend: "He wants to start a sparechange website, but it looks as if he was beaten to the punch" (Daosu, 2002, Aug.

---

<sup>29</sup> A link through which people can easily send money to the blogger through an online money transfer service called PayPal.

31); the donation capability, according to this uptake, makes the blog a “sparechange website.”

Such responses suggest that innovations in writing permitted by new technologies can be reaccented via identification with antecedents (blogs identified as “diaries” or “panhandling,” weblog posts about the environment associated with “articles” or “essays,” or Sharepoint MySite pages associated with Facebook pages.) Those identifications are shaped by, and in turn shape, perceptions of how a rhetor is addressing a rhetorical exigence. If we believe that homeless rhetors are likely to address homelessness through pathos and personal narrative, or that environmentalists are likely to do so through information and argument, these beliefs about “homeless people” or “environmentalists” will inform how we interpret innovative writing in terms of antecedent genres. In turn, interpreting such writing in these ways—seeing evidence that these are the kinds of writing these subjects produce—reaffirms those beliefs.

*Street Newspapers and Tip Jars: Resisting Uptakes*

Barbieux's responses to these uptakes are suggestive. They draw attention to two responses to mischaracterizations. Rhetors may reject outright meta-genre linking their texts with antecedents (as McNeill observes (forthcoming)) or may themselves invoke alternate antecedents. They can publicly assert, that is, what their writing is or is not: “Blogs are not diaries,” “Blog posts are not essays,” and “A blog is not a newsletter” (Defren, Mar. 29, 2006)—or “A blog is like a magazine by one person” (Allen, Feb 20, 2008) or “A blog is a kind of online diary.” Barbieux told Shachtman and a *USA Today* reporter (Humphrey, 2003, Mar. 17) that he had previously edited and published a street newspaper called *Homeward*. He writes the same in a September 9, 2002 blog post (a

month after the Shachtman article), offering the street newspaper as an antecedent genre alternative to the self-focused diary—an antecedent recognizable as providing “a voice for a once unheard community” (Van Lier, 1999, 16). In a September 10, 2002 post on his blog, he points to another antecedent genre, the political pamphlet or flyer. He tells readers that he has recommended blogging to his friend who used to publish a “flyer” or “pamphlet” that offered a counter-narrative to the one produced by a local mission, the Nashville Rescue Mission (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 10). Like the street newspaper, this antecedent situates the blog in a set of public genres that speak out on behalf of others. Writing of how his friend takes up his recommendation, Barbieux tells a story of genre evolution much different from “diary becomes internet diary”:

Well, here it is, Jack's Mission Blog. It is Jack's Mission to inform you about life at the Mission. Compare both the Mission's web site, and Jack's, and weigh the difference for yourself. (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 10)

This genre talk does not reject the diary (after all, the blog does address exigence in part through diary-like autobiographical writing), but counters assertions that the blog is *simply* a diary, attempting to protect the innovative use of the blog for both self-cultivation/validation and for advocacy. As Barbieux’s handling of meta-generic classifications of his blog as a diary shows, in an environment of public meta-generic uptakes, rhetors may clarify or reassert the nature of the genre by invoking multiple antecedents, especially in the face of complaints or competing claims.

The panhandling charge against his blog gets similar though more direct treatment. Barbieux publicly complained in an early post about readers’ “confusion” over the character of his blog:

There still seems to be a bit of confusion about me having a PayPal button on this blog. I first became aware of the donation button when I saw it on other blogs, other "non-homeless" blogs. I also found donation buttons on internet service web sites such as b3ta.com.

I am a bit confused as to why there is a difference between my blog and others.

*On other sites the PayPal donation button is considered a tip jar, but on my site it's considered panhandling?* This is an obvious double standard and indicative of the prejudice that people have towards homeless people. To bring such things to your attention is one of the reasons I am blogging. (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 19)

(emphasis mine)

Offering an alternative model for the genre (it is a performance which might earn "tips"), and calling out the unsympathetic uptakes as "an obvious double standard" and "prejudice," he reasserts the generic character of his blog: *The Homeless Guy* is responding to exigencies of homelessness not by begging but by raising awareness.

The homeless blog therefore suggests that Jamieson's observations about antecedent genres as constraint remain relevant to online genres, where technologically-mediated changes appear to present "unprecedented rhetorical situation[s]" which encourage rhetors to turn to past experiences and genres (Jamieson, 1975, 408). But it also suggests questions that remain unanswered in Jamieson's account, and in subsequent accounts of antecedent genres which I discuss below. Though Jamieson characterized antecedent genres as the constraint, we might more properly characterize her observations as showing how meta-generic talk about an antecedent genre may act as a constraint: it is not just the lingering traces of an antecedent, but awareness and discussion of those

traces. If meta-generic talk can constrain discourse, how might this potential be heightened in an online environment, where meta-generic activity is vigorous and public in new ways? Especially given the socially and economically marginal positions of some rhetors now seen as being given a “voice” online (Mitra & Watts, 2002), how might rhetors’ own participation in this meta-generic activity impact the possibilities for generic innovation and evolution?

*New and Improved: Innovation and Evolution in Theories of Online Genre*

Other studies of genre and the internet have, like this one, been concerned with the relationship between old and new genres. But emphasizing the “newness” of online genres (as in Dillon and Gushrowski’s designation of the personal homepage as the first “uniquely digital” genre (2000)) overlooks the dynamics of uptake. Shepherd and Watters, for example, propose a neat taxonomy of “cybergenres” in which “novel” cybergenres

may be completely new genres, not based on any genre existing previously in another medium, or they may be based on genres originally replicated in the new medium but which have evolved so far from the original that they are classed as being new genres. (1998, 3)

The homeless blog suggests that such divisions are not as straightforward as they might appear; even something quite new and unanticipated may invite comparisons with what has gone before.

Acknowledging meta-discourse about antecedent genres is one way to take up Miller and Shepherd’s invitation to take “a careful look at the nature and sources of stability and recurrence” (forthcoming) instead of just change and newness. It is also an

opportunity to further rhetorical genre theory's concerns with power and ideology in genre. As Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko (2002) remind us, and as contributors to their volume demonstrate (for example, Schryer, Pare) genre theorists have brought important questions about ideology to the table. Early genre theory raised concerns about the need to provide "access to power and status for disadvantaged students" by teaching them the genres of the powerful (Freedman & Medway, 1994, 3). The "Sydney School" of genre studies in particular focused on analyzing and breaking down such genres so that teachers could make them less opaque and more accessible to marginalized subjects. More recently, Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko identify a move toward investigating the effects that mastering genres of power has on individuals; in "coercive" situations (2002, 4), they suggest, even as individuals master these, they internalize the ideological assumptions embedded in them. The meta-discursive environment of the internet, I argue, requires returning to the question of access but via newer concerns about subjectivity. Genres like the homeless blog suggest that online genres may promise new kinds of subject positions ("citizen," "advocate," "writer"), but that this promise may open such genres up to contestation.

Studies of weblogging, like studies of online genre more generally, offer two main approaches to understanding innovation and evolution in genres like the homeless blog. The blog is alternately conceived of by scholars and internet users as a new genre enabled by technology and as a "*remediation*,"<sup>30</sup> or remedying, of existing genres. Blog

---

<sup>30</sup> I use "remediation" in its most general sense—to fix a flaw, to remedy—to describe the potential reaccenting of genres already familiar and available. I do not draw here on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's notion of remediation as articulated in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). Bolter and Grusin usefully discuss the representation of one medium in another, their argument specifically addressing media's impulses toward immediacy and transparency. Miller and Shepherd intriguingly draw on Bolter and Grusin's work to discuss features of the blog which create immediacy, and which in turn relate to the exigence of the blog. Brooks, Nichols, C. and Priebe, in "Remediation, genre, and motivation:

studies of both types gesture toward how older responses to rhetorical exigence inform new possibilities, but raise questions about how to account for responses to genres like the homeless blog. Tracing the early evolution of the blog in the late 1990s, Miller and Shepherd in "Blogging as Social Action" (2004) see the emergence of a *new* genre for *existing* exigency; they suggest that in the case of the "personal" blog, "we can examine what the evolutionary biologist would call speciation, the development of a new genre, rather than the process of adaptative transformation" (2004). This new genre meets an existing and "longstanding" exigence of "self-cultivation and validation," which can newly be met online because the blog has been "made possible by technology that is becoming more available and easier to use" at a kairotic moment when "voyeurism and exhibitionism have been morally neutralized and are on their ways to becoming ordinary ways of being..." (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). They account for the presence and influence of antecedent genres by proposing that "ancestral genres"

should be considered part of the rhetorical situation to which the rhetor responds, constraining the perception and definition of the situation and its decorum for both the rhetor and the audience. And, within limits, by their incorporation into a response to a novel situation, ancestral genres help define the potentialities of the new genre: the subject-positions of the rhetor and audience(s), the nature of the recurrent exigence, the decorum (or "fittingness" in Bitzer's term) of response.

(Miller & Shepherd, 2004) (emphasis mine)

---

Key concepts for teaching with weblogs" (2004), suggest that Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation can be used to examine how genres are remade online. I suggest that a more general notion of remediation is more appropriate for this latter task unless the focus of the study is the transparency or immediacy of the genre in question.

This image of “speciation” potentially constrained by older genres raises questions. Are “new” genres less vulnerable to the traces of ancestral genres than those genres which result from a “process of adaptative transformation”? More importantly for thinking about the homeless blog, how do people recognize when an antecedent (a diary, a panhandler’s sign) has been “incorporated” into a new genre; and whose perception wins out? As McNeill points out in her study of the blog as (not) “diary,” “Online as well as off, paying attention to who gets to speak—or, more importantly, whose opinions are heeded—about a text-type can illuminate key social elements of genre” (forthcoming). If the “ancestral” genre “help[s] define the potentialities of the new genre” “within limits” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004), what (or whose) are those “limits” or situational constraints?

Having observed the evolution of blogging and concluding that the blog is a “medium” permitting a multiplicity of genres like the “public affairs blog,” Miller and Shepherd take up the question of antecedent genres by asking why *formal* traits of old genres linger in new genres (forthcoming). We might think, for instance, of page numbers in online articles. Their conclusion—that it is due to “oppressive institutional constraints or to the inadequate inventional powers of a rhetor” resulting from “an excess of decorum, an over-deference to precedent or to institutional history” (forthcoming) is intriguing. But it does not account for how formal traces are perceived as “incorporated” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004) by some and not by others as they are in uptakes of the homeless blog—how some see in homeless blogs’ dated entries and use of first-person pronouns formal traces of the diary, while others do not.

Other theories of the internet’s effects on genre innovation propose that the internet may act as a way to “remediate” existing genres. From this perspective, a

homeless blog may be an innovative modification of an existing genre, taking advantage of that genre's recognizable nature and function, but also working better than the earlier "version" of the genre. In his study of newspapers' move to online news sites, Boczkowski, though not a genre theorist, usefully shows how the potential of technical innovations such as hyperlinking in news articles is influenced by journalists' local values regarding gatekeeping and liability (2004, 81-82). But other accounts of "offline/online" genres are often problematic because they assume a level of consensus or common knowledge about "types" and about the correspondence between antecedent genres and their remediated form. Current genre theoretical accounts of blogging, for instance, tend to propose that the blog is a genre with *sub-genres* identifiable and often linked to older genres by formal characteristics. Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe (2004), for instance, adopt veteran blogger Rebecca Blood's<sup>31</sup> categories of "journal, notebook, and filter weblogs" (Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004, 1), suggesting in turn that these categories "remediate existing print genres (journals, notebooks, and note cards)" (1). Such approaches assume that formal features (for example, dated entries in chronological order) reveal the nature of the text. If exigence is considered, it is only in relation to print antecedent texts that have similar formal qualities. That is, formal features point to the notebook, so the exigence motivating the "notebook blog" is assumed to be the same as that of the notebook. Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe's approach does recognize that there may be a connection between formal traits and the social action of the genre, but it fails

---

<sup>31</sup> In her history of the blog, Rebecca Blood notes that when free and easy-to-use blogging software arrived in 1999, early-style "filter" blogs, which sifted through internet content to provide links to and commentary on that content, were joined by so-called "diary" or "journal" blogs, which offered personal accounts of writers' lives (Blood, 2000).

in its assumption that formally similar texts (“notebook blogs” and “notebooks”) are also similar in terms of the rhetorical situation.

In fact, *consensus* about the relationship between antecedent genres and online genres—even with something as apparently straightforward as “diary”/“online diary”—is hardly as stable as such accounts imply. Audiences respond to the homeless blog as a configuration of form and situation—including the subject position of its writer—rather than as one of the blog types set out by Blood (2000), Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe (2004), Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus (2005), Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright (2004), and others. The genre is defined not by its formal characteristics or simply as an instance of the broad category “blog,” but is defined in the nexus between the reader’s socially-constructed notion of communications technology, his or her imagination of the homeless blogger’s rhetorical exigence and rhetorical opportunities, and—as I show later in this chapter—his or her perception of what other people have provisionally accepted about the genre.

How, then, might readers and rhetors online *negotiate* competing perceptions about antecedent genres, writing subjects, and rhetorical situations? Studies identifying multiple antecedent genres or the hybrid nature of blogs underline the need for negotiation. Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus, in their study of the blog as a “bridging” genre characterize blogs as “a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources” (2005, 144) such as diaries, editorials, project journals, and homepages (2005, 158-159). These antecedent genres each have obviously different implications for the likely range of uptakes: one responds differently to traces of an editorial than to traces of a diary; these traces will be even more differently received (more potentially contentious)

depending on who is seen as editorializing or diarizing. Miller and Shepherd themselves, asking where the blog came from, likewise identify several "ancestral" genres that may be at work in different types of blogs: the ship's log, the "commonplace book," the clipping service, the pamphlet and broadside, the diary, and the homepage, among others (2004)—all with similarly diverse possibilities for uptake. Just as the "social scenes" (Giltrow & Stein, forthcoming) of genre are multiply-determined, the perceived presence of multiple antecedents creates a need for negotiation: if a genre is a "hybrid," how do the elements of that hybrid influence the life and evolution of the new genre? What kind of interactions occur between perceptions of the social scene of the genre and perceptions of the hybrid elements or antecedent genres at work? In the next part of this chapter, I show how conditions of publicness and fervent meta-generic activity make these questions more urgent, and suggest that Goffman's theory of face-work can provide insight into how generic innovations are negotiated.

### *Public Meta-Genre and Face-Work*

Investigations of the hybrid nature of some genres are not new, and not confined to online genres; Kathleen Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Cambell argued much earlier for thinking of genres as "not only dynamic responses to circumstances; each is a *dynamis*—a potential fusion of elements that may be energized or actualized as a strategic response to a situation" (1982, 146). But in online environments of public meta-genre, that hybridity comes to our attention in new ways, raising questions about the "potential" of each element to be "energized," and about whose uptakes call elements into a state of activity. The homeless blog is subject to new conditions created by *public* uptake and by a surge in public *meta-generic* activity. Genres like the homeless blog and electronic

petition are often public—that is, they circulate publicly and can be accessed by anyone. Importantly, uptakes of these public texts are likewise often public themselves: responses to blogs like Barbieux’s appear on an unprecedented scale in settings where anyone might join or overhear the discussion. For instance, blog posts about homeless bloggers, as well as newspaper and magazine articles online, introduce homeless bloggers to ever-widening publics. In doing so, these public uptakes arrange for uptakes themselves, both in the "blogosphere" (the collective of networked blogs on the Web) and elsewhere. That is, participants may take up a homeless blog, uptakes of a homeless blog, or uptakes of uptakes of a homeless blog.<sup>32</sup>

These public uptakes often engage in *meta-generic* activity by commenting explicitly on the genre, often, as I have suggested above, making claims about antecedent genres. Janet Giltrow describes as “meta-genres” (2002) the “atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations—atmospheres surrounding genres” (Giltrow, 2002, 195). Looking at these atmospheres, Giltrow suggests, we might ask about their motivations and effects—their usefulness or dangers.<sup>33</sup> One effect of the public meta-generic activity around the homeless blog is to draw attention to the competing trajectories of uptake the genre faces (some confirming, some blocking), and to one’s own place in a web of competing uptakes. Arguably, rhetors often face competing uptakes; online, however, the environment of public meta-generic uptakes draws them to rhetors’ and readers’ attention. This environment thus offers all

---

<sup>32</sup> For instance, bloggers may quote or hyperlink to newspaper articles about homeless people, often with commentary that invites readers' comments. Uptakes may occur privately (through email, through readers talking to the blogger in the coffee shop, or following the blogger's advice in one's interaction with a homeless person, but even private uptakes may become public when the blogger writes about them.

<sup>33</sup> Some meta-genres, for instance, "seem to implicate writers in the struggles and conflicts of institutional systems" (Giltrow, 2002, 191); in other situations, the presence of more than one meta-genre may create a site of contest.

participants opportunities to publicly ratify uptakes, or to reject them in cases of misrecognition of their own or others' discourse. Public responses to online genres take an active and complex role in negotiating agreement about the lineage, ambitions, and potential of such genres—especially those of online genres from activists or marginalized writers, which, in promising social improvement, even social transformation, open themselves to contradiction and contestation.

Another effect is that, in a public meta-generic uptake, one's confirmation or denial of a genre—one's rejection of a homeless blog as "panhandling" or as a narcissistic diary-like waste of precious computer time that ought to be used for circulating resumes, for instance—becomes publicly attached to oneself, an act of self-presentation that opens oneself up to evaluation. Consider the implications of the homeless blog's status as a civic genre, a genre that sets out to do civic action such as advocating for others or promoting democratic discourse. We might include in this group genres like the street newspaper, the political pamphlet, the World Vision-type television ad soliciting donations, and so on; we can also include civic genres taken up online to address issues of social justice, such as the electronic petition, the activist website, or the social advocacy video game,<sup>34</sup>—genres which appear able to overcome constraints posed by space and time, economics, prejudice, laziness, and so on facing civic discourse. Like such genres, homeless blogs speak on behalf of others to insert their voices into public discourse, to speak back to texts that speak about them. To read or comment on such genres, to take a stance toward them via our uptake—for example, to buy a street

---

<sup>34</sup>Social advocacy video games, a type of "persuasive game," are created on the premise that by experiencing and learning about a situation such as homelessness or global hunger in a game format, players can be persuaded to see situations differently and then to move toward positions of social advocacy. See, for example, Terry Lavender's game "Homeless: It's No Game" (<http://www.homelessgame.net/>) and the United Nations World Food Program game "Food Force" (<http://www.food-force.com/>).

newspaper, to forward an electronic petition, or to cite a homeless blogger in discussion—has implications for how others perceive our own beliefs about citizenship, democracy, homeless people, and so on. Competing trajectories of uptake, therefore, may arise from readers' concerns with their own self-presentation: a desire to present oneself as pro-human rights by taking up civic genres in a sympathetic way may conflict with one's desire to appear a cautious, discerning and sensible consumer of online texts. Uptakes of a genre and its antecedents are guided in part by readers' recognition of formal characteristics of a genre and recognition of its status as a typified solution to a recognizable problem; but how are they also guided by readers' awareness of the implications their uptakes have for their own self-presentation?

Goffman's theory of "face-work" in social encounters, more commonly used in studies of self-presentation or politeness, can help theorize the competing trajectories of uptake and environment of public meta-genre that the homeless blog brings to our attention. As others have pointed out, Goffman is useful for countering technologically deterministic "hyperbole" about postmodern identities in cyberspace, because "His theory is premised not on an elusive definition of selfhood per se but on the image of self that social participants put forth as viable means of negotiating normal social life" (Wynn & Katz, 1997). For genre theorists, Goffman offers a way to think about how the rhetorical situation and "fitting" responses come to be negotiated between participants in discursive encounters: how, for example, genre ratification can be perceived as threatening, how misrecognition can be resisted, and how disruption may call for repair. Looking at how and why people arrive at and maintain provisional agreements about the homeless blog, a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1959, 10) about rhetor, rhetorical exigence, audience,

and uptakes, can in turn help theorize the evolution of online civic genres or other contested genres facing public meta-genre.

Goffman explores how we negotiate provisionally-agreed-upon definitions of situations in which we have laid claim, temporarily, to an identity and position, and have accepted others' claims. In any genre, but especially in genres associated explicitly with self-presentation (those in the blogosphere, on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, on online dating sites, and so on), rhetors lay temporary claim to identities and positions—they take lines—as part of setting out to meet rhetorical exigencies. Barbieux, for example, turns to the blog to "act out" (Goffman, 1955, 5) lines that he hopes will be accepted. Following common practice in other blogs, he posts personal narratives, links to webpages that he thinks are important, photographs, book reviews, pop culture references, and so on. This "pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself" (Goffman, 1955, 5) first asserts Barbieux's *individuality*—he takes a line as someone *different from* stereotypes of homeless people as lazy, indifferent to people's opinions of them, uneducated, and drug-addicted. Second, it presents Barbieux as an *advocate* and therefore *citizen*: one whose responsibility it is to critique social structures, to invite public sphere dialogue on issues like homelessness, to stand up for marginalized people in one's society, to counter the narrative that all homeless people are alike. As part of his taking of these lines—advocate, citizen, and so on—Barbieux also takes a line as *writer*. In one early post, for example, he implies that the writing in his blog is analogous to that in a book (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 1).

However, in Anne Freedman's terms, more familiar to rhetorical theories of genre, one's line is dependent on uptakes both anticipated and actual. Effectively, uptakes may confirm or deny the line the rhetor is taking, either by misrecognizing, deliberately misconstruing, or ignoring it. Seen through face-work, uptakes that "take" the homeless blog as alternative journalism confirm the genre's motive to represent marginal voices and the rhetor's line as journalist or advocate. Uptakes that "take" it as panhandling fail to ratify the line (seeing the antecedent as incommensurate with the line); in failing to ratify the line, they also reject the genre's putative motive, threatening to block the social action of the genre. Freedman's observations about uptake offer important cautions about the kind of optimistic conclusions that Poster and others come to about "acts of discourse" in the public sphere: access to media or other means of cultural production may mean nothing if the social action of genres is blocked by uptakes which deny the status of the genre, or of the line the rhetor is taking.

*Subjectivity and Antecedent Genres as Constraint*

Given Barbieux's complaint about the "double standard" in characterizations of his PayPal button as "panhandling" (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 19) we might suggest that genre innovation and evolution is constrained by perceptions of the antecedent genres attached to the line the rhetor is taking. In contrast to Jamieson's, and later Miller and Shepherd's suggestion that sometimes the ancestral genre will constrain the social action of the genre, it may be the recognizability of the subject and the subject's line that constrains how genres and their antecedents are perceived in the first place. The Paypal/panhandling/tip jar thread complicates the question of how traces of "ancestral" genres are "recognized" in new genres; it calls into question whether the ancestral genres

that readers identify have, in fact, been "incorporated" into new genres in the way that Miller and Shepherd propose in their study of the blog (2004). The competing characterizations of *The Homeless Guy* suggest that a new genre may bear almost no resemblance to a claimed antecedent, that a reader or rhetor may perceive the presence of antecedent genres that others do not. In fact, uptakes may respond meta-generically to the perceived presence of the antecedent because the subject position of the rhetor invokes a set of fitting responses. In cases where a genre is conspicuously a hybrid genre incorporating many antecedent elements, a similarly-cued reader may privilege one element over another regardless of how slight its presence in the new genre.

Viewed as face-work, the case of the homeless blog draws attention to another way of thinking about the genres that "belong" to a community. For instance, we can expand the notion of a "genre set"—a set of genres shared by professionals through which they do their work (Devitt, 1991). Rather than limiting "genre set" to describing the genres used by a community, we might instead think of it as the group of genres associated with a subject position like "homeless person," whether such subjects would ever use them or not. A genre set conceived in this way may serve as part of the expectations of such a person's "personal front," the "expressive equipment" (Goffman, 1959, 22) with which they are associated.

And our expectations of their personal front will vary according to our local circumstances and belief systems. Homeless rhetors and their advocates are often seen as turning to genres that focus on immediate needs. In North America, these occur as part of encounters with the public or with government agencies: the panhandler's sign, which may include a very abbreviated version of a personal narrative ("Got downsized"); the

welfare or low-income housing worker interview; and the sales exchange between street newspaper (*Street News*, *The Big Issue*) vendor and customer. Hence the PayPal button is interpreted as panhandling not because Barbieux has incorporated the antecedent genre into a novel situation, but because taking a line as "homeless" invokes expectations of such antecedents. Haraway's interpretation of Trudeau's comic reminds us of one reason that a homeless blog might be considered a diary even if it contained many non-diary-like elements, and why the diary might be considered part of the genre set associated with homeless rhetors. In suggesting that the street person given a free email account would choose an email address like "lunatic@street\_level," the comic relies for its punch line on the common assumption that homeless people often become homeless through mental illness. Although Trudeau's comic suggests that job-hunting genres like the resume are the most fitting ones for homeless people to take up, the association his comic makes between homelessness and mental illness also invokes the diary or journal—a genre sometimes used for therapeutic purposes—as part of the genre set of homeless people; diary-like writing (offline or online) can be a fitting response for such rhetors if the purpose is therapy, self-healing and thereby reintegration into mainstream society (as, in fact, some homeless bloggers describe their own blogs).<sup>35</sup>

This strong association between the line taken in a genre like a homeless blog and the antecedents taken up as defining features of the genre suggests that even apparently stable generic classifications can be subject to reaccenting depending on the line its rhetor takes. For instance, at first glance the "blog" and "homeless blog" would seem to fit Heyd's proposed two-level "ecology" of genres: "a function-based 'supergenre', which

---

<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, it must be pointed out, this association between mental illness and homelessness also implies that the online discourse of homeless people might be best treated as suspicious (as can be seen in uptakes of Anya Peters' blog *Wandering Scribe*).

branches out into a variety of associated ‘subgenres’ individuated through form and content specificities” (Heyd, forthcoming)—with the blog being function-based and the homeless blog being “individuated through form and content specificities.” In contrast to the proposal that supergenres are “medially stable and have relatively clear genre antecedents in pre-digital discourse,” while subgenres “are more diverse, more prone to change, and may easily be generated within a changing medial environment”) (Heyd, forthcoming), I suggest that even the “relatively clear genre antecedents” of the “blog” are not as stable as might be thought. It may not be the “form and content specificities” that open a genre to instability, but the line the rhetor takes in generating form and content and readers’ responses to form and content in relation to that line.

*“Working Consensus”: Provisional Agreement as Exigence*

Remembering how and why people perform face-work illuminates potential constraints that may arise from competing trajectories of uptake in response to “lines” rhetors take. At the same time, face-work suggests, finally, how consensus can be negotiated and itself become a constraint on genre. Goffman's theory of face-work observes that when one's line is accepted, other participants take up lines in response; participants consequently not only “recognize” each other but also form a shared definition of the situation that (ideally) they mutually strive to protect and that must be vigilantly maintained to protect the face of all participants. They come to a “working consensus”: a temporary and provisional agreement about the lines they have *accepted* from one another, “a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement/ as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored” (1959, 9-10).

In other words, the fulfillment of hopes for new access to subject positions such as those expressed by Poster and Bazerman depends in part on participants' willingness to honour the moves made and agreements reached by other participants. Goffman's view of situation can encompass Bitzer's definition of rhetorical situation "as a natural context of person, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (1968, 5). In the social encounters of which Goffman writes, people's view of situation and participants can include their view of whether or not participants might consider a rhetorical situation to be at work, and of what kind of responses might be fitting according to the lines that are likely to be accepted. At the same time, however, Goffman's situation is not limited by Bitzer's proposals that though a situation may involve more than one exigence, "in any rhetorical situation there will be at least one controlling exigence which functions as the organizing principle" (Bitzer 1968, 7) (whether it is weakly or strongly perceived by those encountering the situation) (1968, 7). Rather, a "player" may perceive multiple exigencies that accompany the lines other players are taking, and sense which lines are being acknowledged and accepted by other players—and therefore what final definition of situation he or she has a responsibility to protect (or disrupt).

Goffman's theory of situation thus allows us to see more clearly how assessments of rhetorical situation—of the exigence serving as the "organizing principle," might be influenced by players' perception of the working consensus—of what has been provisionally accepted by other players in the context of a series of exchanges. Additionally, it allows us to consider that maintaining the definition of a situation may

itself become an exigence that rhetors try to meet. Goffman's observations point to the tensions inherent in maintaining definitions of the situation in social encounters:

Sometimes disruptions occur through unmeant gestures, faux pas, and scenes, thus discrediting or contradicting the definition of the situation that is being maintained.... We find that performance, audience, and outsiders all utilize techniques for saving the show, whether by avoiding likely disruptions or by correcting for unavoided ones, or by making it possible for others to do so. (1959, 239)

Taken to genre theory, these observations about avoiding disruption suggest that protecting working consensus about the nature and fitness of a discursive response to exigence requires both rhetors and readers to strategically avoid or respond to disruptions that occur. The desire to avoid disruption can itself be a constraint. This is especially true of situations where we anticipate conflict about the genre's fitness, the possibility of face-threatening meta-genre, and participants' vulnerability to disruption. In genres like the homeless blog written to counter common beliefs about homelessness, an email petition forwarded to one's entire social network to protest an infringement of academic freedom, or a Wikipedia entry created to advertise a blog,<sup>36</sup> rhetors may be criticized for the genre they choose to address the problems they see. In cases such as the first two, experiencing sympathy for the problem and shared sensitivity of how vulnerable the rhetor is to public criticism, readers may hold back from criticism and even use meta-genre or other meta-discourse to protect the rhetor from criticism. As Goffman suggests we do in everyday social encounters, that is, they may "utilize techniques for saving the show, whether by

---

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, the Wikipedia entry for "Wandering Scribe" (2008, Feb 9 (last edit)) and the linked "talk page for discussing improvements to the Wandering Scribe article" (2006, Aug. 26 last comment) where posters criticize the article as advertising and call for its deletion.

avoiding likely disruptions or by correcting for unavoided ones, or by making it possible for others to do so” (1959, 239).

To understand how this process may influence developments in public genres with public uptakes, I look finally at how Barbieux and his readers, and blogger Anya Peters and her readers, work toward and protect "working consensus" about the "homeless blog." As in the social encounters Goffman looks at, in situations of generic innovation, rhetors and readers may achieve a level of consensus about the genre and the lines being taken in which claims are "temporarily honored." One way that working consensus can be observed in Barbieux's blog is that, as his ability to arrange for uptakes becomes more secure, Barbieux begins to point toward the homeless blog itself, consolidating the status of the genre rather than pointing toward antecedents. As he notes in one blog post, "There are other homeless blogs out there"—even some which are "false" (Barbieux 2004, Sept 27) suggesting that the genre is recognizable enough to be taken up by rhetors for whom the actual exigencies are absent. Additionally, he seeks out and lists links to other homeless blogs. In a March 2006 post, for example, Barbieux draws our attention to an article about a "New Homeless Blog," Michael Brown's *View from the Sidewalk*, and requests:

I would like to create an up-to-date blogroll [a hyperlinked list of blogs] of all homeless blogs. If you know of any, please email them to me - or you can make a note of it in the comments section of this post. Thanks. (Barbieux 2006, Mar. 2)

That is, over time, an image of the genre is consolidated, and people begin to talk about the "homeless blog," suggesting there is already a level of consensus about the lines that people are taking when they generate this kind of text.

Uptakes of the Paypal button controversy suggest that temporary, provisional consensus about the genre can also emerge from meta-generic uptakes that protect the rhetor's line. The *USA Today* article that takes up the PayPal thread confirms Barbieux's meta-generic repair (the PayPal button as "tip jar") and his resistance to panhandling, and therefore confirms the line Barbieux is taking and the role that the genre of homeless blog plays in establishing that line.

The blog includes a "*tip jar*," a button that allows visitors to use their credit cards to deposit money in his bank account. Barbieux, who says he doesn't approve of panhandlers, sees the feature as a way for people to support *his work*. (Humphrey 2003, Mar. 17) (emphasis mine)

This meta-generic explanation, itself an uptake of a meta-generic debate, might be read as maintaining Barbieux's face, consolidating the line he has taken, and therefore as revealing the negotiation of—or even the protection of—a working consensus about the genre and the Paypal button as an element of genre evolution.

It suggests also that in the face of a multiplicity of readers, public genre talk, and new instantiations of the genre, this consensus will never be complete or secure. Rather, it may exist between rhetor and readers who take up either text in an agreeable rather than contradictory way: a localized provisional consensus. In the context of public genres where rhetors are seen as asserting lines, some meta-genre, "situated expressions, motivated by their contexts of use" (Giltrow 2002, 196), can be thought of as situated not only in terms of the rhetorical situation but in terms of the working consensus about the genre. They may be "motivated by their contexts of use" in the service of responding to face claims and maintaining definitions of situations. The need for initial acceptance of a

line, and for its continuing acceptance as fitting to the working consensus, constrains how rhetors can take up genres new to them or can remediate existing genres.<sup>37</sup> But the temporary honouring of claims and the impulse to maintain face opens a space in which rhetors may address rhetorical exigencies—a space in which innovations might thrive.

*Monitoring Disruption: Genre Evolution*

Finally, focusing on arrangements for and protection of working consensus about genres also suggests ways to theorize threats to the life-span of a genre. While the emergence of new instantiations of the homeless blog assists rhetors in arriving at a working consensus about the genre, the emergence of new motives for individual rhetors, or the shifting of the rhetorical situation (an increase in exigence's urgency, for example, such as a sudden crisis), may create a desire for further innovation of the genre that may undermine consensus and require renegotiations. The evolution of genre may, in this way, be face-threatening to the reader, because the reader's understanding of the situation may be undermined.

Anya Peters' blog *Wandering Scribe* provides a case in point. Begun in February 2006, *Wandering Scribe* claims to record Peters' experience of living homeless in her car near London. Its uptakes create disruption to the working consensus about her blog as a homeless blog: it leads to a book deal with Harper Collins, who contract her to write a

---

<sup>37</sup> Working consensus about the definition of the situation may be undermined by developments in the homeless blog itself, requiring that bloggers like Barbieux maintain a line that is consistent or risk generic decay. Both Barbieux and James McCoy, for instance, produce writing that they deem unsuitable for their homeless blogs, maintaining the lines they've taken by keeping such material in other "non-homeless" blogs. McCoy, whose blog emphasizes his roles as "voice" for homeless people and as political commentator on homeless issues, started a blog called *Jamie's World of Poetry* where he posted poetry and sold a book of poetry that he self-produced. While McCoy's profile itself describes McCoy as writing poetry, supporting McCoy's line as a formerly illiterate drug addict who has overcome past failures, the sharing (and sale) of the poetry itself McCoy deemed unsuitable for *Jamie's Big Voice*. Likewise, Barbieux himself, over the years, began several other blogs, including an Ebay blog to promote origami that he sold, a blog where he gave advice for a fee, and a blog that aimed to focus on "non-homeless" issues.

“misery memoir” (*Abandoned* (Peters 2007)) about her childhood abuse. In the terms suggested by Charles Bazerman (1994), her blog moves into a new “genre system”:

Peters moves from “homeless blogger,” writer of an “online diary,” to “published author” of a memoir. The uptake of Peters’ blog in the world of commercial publishing is seen as disrupting—for good or bad—the system of genres that lead to remuneration for writing. Uptakes of her announcement of the book deal—in comments on her blog, comments and posts on other blogs, and comments attached to the BBC news coverage of her blog—have varied from congratulation<sup>38</sup> to vituperative attacks: spurring other critics<sup>39</sup> on, her biggest critic, the author of a copycat blog called *Wandering Ego*, has repeatedly implied that Peters faked homelessness via the blog in order to get attention from publishers (for example 2006, May 19). Moving outside the genre set/system associated with the line originally taken may cast doubt upon the line, and therefore undermine working consensus about the situation. Such public critical uptakes of Peters’ blog are therefore face-threatening to Peters personally, but also indirectly threaten the face of other homeless bloggers and their readers by disrupting the consensus that has been worked out about a) what homeless blogs do and b) the lines that readers are taking when they take up homeless blogs in different ways.

Though working consensus is enough for people to keep going forward, Goffman’s discussion prepares us for such eventualities in the lives of new genres by reminding us that working consensus also requires constant monitoring to ensure that it is

---

<sup>38</sup> Reporter Terence Blacker, for instance, echoing the optimism of Poster and others that rhetors online can gain increased access to the means of cultural production, suggests approvingly that Peters’ success shows that the “medium” of the weblog may reconfigure expectations about who has access to the “closed, forbidding world of publishing” (Blacker, 2006, June 2).

<sup>39</sup>For example, in a blog post entitled “Wandering Scribe Does Book Deal,” Michael Allen muses on his initial skepticism and current cynicism about Peters’ blog (given the book deal’s possibility and actualization) (2006, June 27).

not disrupted. Such public statements put readers—of Peters' blog or of other homeless blogs—in a position of having to ignore the face threat, to join in (hence redefining the situation, with subsequent implications for the kinds of writing we will or will not accept from rhetors like Peters and Barbieux), or to repair/mitigate face threats with public statements of support. Kevin Barbieux, significantly, has publicly supported Peters' success even though elsewhere he has remarked on “false” homeless bloggers. In a February 2, 2007 post, he writes:

She did it. She wrote the book. I'm glad for her, and I'm very envious. She got the book deal through the blog she wrote about being homeless - "Wandering Scribe"

The story of my own book is still in my head, and as I'm still homeless, I don't have an ending for it, yet. That, and I become so easily distracted. I imagine this will be a great book. In reading the synopsis, I have no doubt that this is will be as accurate an account of homelessness that you'll find. Click on the picture and buy the book. (Barbieux 2007, Feb. 2)

His support and expression of envy counters the idea that Peters' success disrupts working consensus about her blog: that “homeless person” and “writer” are contradictory lines, and that a homeless blog's commercial success invalidates its generic status as a fitting response to exigencies of homelessness. Observing this process of disruption, monitoring, and repair underlines meta-genre's dual potential: for protecting working consensus and stabilizing genre; and for challenging participants' face and throwing genre and situation into a vulnerable state.

### *Conclusion*

The homeless blog suggests implications for rhetorical approaches to weblogging specifically, for understanding how media like the internet might condition the rhetorical situation of other genres, and for understanding genre evolution within questions about power and ideology. It should be clear that my approach advocates revision to current notions of blog types—to the separation of blogs into two or three types determined by formal features or content alone. Analysis of the homeless blog therefore also suggests cautions regarding interpretations of the uptakes of blog genres. One caution is that researchers need to look at uptakes of particular genres, not only of broader categories such as “blog.” Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004), for example, analyze which populations (youth, women, men) are most likely to create which types of blogs, and then examine mass media coverage of “blogs” (as a general category) to see which type of blog, and therefore which population, media favours. Their approach is to match subject position with formal types (teen girls write diaries, adult men write filter blogs), and to line up media uptakes of blogs with those categories. Their study concludes that because media tends to pay more attention to “filter-style” blogs written by older men, other populations of bloggers write at a disadvantage because their audiences will have been swayed by the image of blogging portrayed in the media. I have suggested that, in fact, rhetors and readers respond to particular blogs as instantiations of different genres of blogs—as embedded in rhetorical situations. Moreover, while both blog writers and readers are constantly monitoring media reports of blogs, they are also responding to them. Therefore, analyses of uptakes of blog genres must consider their rhetorical situations and their competing constructions by readers; they must also consider the chain

of uptakes, not privileging mainstream media discourse in its examination of a genre's development. Considering uptakes through the lens of face-work is relevant not only to the homeless blog or other blogs. It is worthwhile considering whether some genres may offer opportunities for face-work that other genres do not by virtue of their place outside highly-structured systems, of their challenge to beliefs in which the public has a special investment, or of their technological features. One example of the latter is the possibility that web texts may be revised: blogs and many web texts are ongoing utterances, with built-in expectations of and mechanisms for revision. Blogs' generic profile, for example, suggests that a blog should be updated frequently, and it is also part of the very nature of blogs—inherently and self-consciously responsive texts—that they respond to other texts and to their own uptakes (a blog comments on events in the world; it remarks upon the comments that readers leave in the “comments” section or on emails that readers send.) "Uptake" may therefore be more subject to face-work considerations because the text that is originally taken up is an ongoing and self-consciously responsive utterance, not a completed utterance. Thus it is not only genres online that invite us to observe the building, monitoring, repair, and breakdown of consensus, but genres similarly subject to public meta-genre, to competing constructions of the rhetorical situation, or to other expectations generated by the affordances” that a medium introduces into a genre's profile.

Looking at how we negotiate the possibilities for generic innovation and evolution online—for reproducing, refining, transforming, or creating genres through the use of new media—allows us to rethink the relationship between "offline" and "online" genres. Rather than asking only about differences or equivalencies between online and

offline genres, or about technology's *effects* on a genre (is an electronic petition the same as a traditional petition?), we can look at why and how meta-generic moves are made which make bids for the presence of one antecedent or another, and how these influence the possibilities for social action. When do texts or their uptakes presume equivalencies? When do they insist on them, or deny them? Thinking of genre innovation and evolution in terms of face-work draws out the distinction between *recognition* of typified actions or other elements of "personal front" (Goffman, 1959, 22) and their *acceptance* in individual contexts. Positing rhetors' interpretations of uptakes within the frame of face-work offers a way to understand how they navigate a multiplicity of uptakes that would promise to have competing effects (some blocking, some confirming the social action of the genre.) In this way, face-work suggests trajectories of response in encounters where the recognition and ratification of both lines and genres are at stake.

Chapter Four: Petitioning Canada Online: Genre Adaptation  
and Local Genre Systems

1. PetitionOnline is like an automatic signature-collecting clipboard, that can be everywhere at once, never gets rained on, never runs out of signature forms, collects every signature instantly, and always has an accurate up-to-the minute count of your progress.

*[http://www.petitiononline.com/petition\\_FAQ.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/petition_FAQ.html)*

2. Mr. Michel Bellehumeur: I rise on a point of order, Mr. Speaker. While we are waiting for the House of Commons to enter the new millennium with respect to electronic petitions, is there unanimous consent to allow the member for Témiscamingue to table this CD-ROM with 17,000 signatures on this issue, particularly since he had tabled a duly completed petition on the same issue before setting out to table the CD-ROM?

The Deputy Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to allow the hon. member to table this petition?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, May 29, 2000

Let us return once more to the coffee shop, your local hangout. Here, you and other locals know how things work and what to expect—including how to solve problems

through familiar genres of writing and speech. This time, standing in front of the bulletin board full of notices, which is next to a row of internet-browsing terminals for patrons to use, you see a notice from the coffee shop owner. It tells readers that there is a current political issue of special importance to her. Her son was severely beaten by some young offenders and there is a proposed bill coming before the House of Commons that would protect young offenders from being tried as adults. The coffee shop owner, speaking out against this new bill, has started an online petition asking for juvenile offenders to be given harsher sentences; she asks you and other patrons to go to the website and sign it. The owner will print the petition when it is finished and deliver it to her Member of Parliament, in hopes that he in turn will bring it forward in the House of Commons in time to speak against the proposed bill. One of the coffee shop's internet browsing terminals is set up with the petition on the screen.

Knowing the owner and her story, you are sympathetic. You support the fact that she is taking action. You have signed petitions before, and feel they are part of the democratic process. You have never, though, signed an *electronic* petition. The petition on the site looks all right—it has the tone and the look you expect of a petition. It also seems timely, a useful way to collect signatures quickly enough to respond to the proposed legislation. But niggling questions remain. Will a petition with electronic signatures be considered acceptable by its addressee? You notice that people have made supportive comments in boxes offered for that purpose next to their names—but you have never seen a petition with comments before, and are not sure if they will be considered acceptable either. What is more, some of the signatures are from people in the United States and Australia—surely their voices will not count in the Canadian House of

Commons. But you see also that many other people have already signed—300 in the past five days—including other victims of young offenders and people you know from your community. If they think this is a useful and legitimate exercise, perhaps you should sign too. And again, you can imagine that even if the petition goes nowhere, it is a heart-warming expression of support for the owner and people like her. Finally, when you think about it, you decide this seems like a useful and innovative way to speak to your government and your community. You “sign” the petition.

How do people know that they can do something familiar and established through writing—like petitioning—in ways they did not before? What are the factors that inform whether changes to familiar genres will be successful—will be understood properly, catch on, and achieve desired results? Are the ways that genre theory currently accounts for this equally relevant to the new ways of doing things that technology—and particularly CMD—introduces? In Chapter Three, drawing on distinctions in genre theory and information science between “new” or “novel” genres and “remediated” or improved genres, I began an examination of genre evolution by looking at a genre that appears new and examining how it is often understood in terms of antecedent genres, and, critically, in terms of genres associated with the subject position of its rhetors. In this chapter, I examine the evolution of an older genre practice, petitioning/electronic petitioning, focusing on petitions addressed by Canadians to their federal government via their House of Commons, Canada’s elected body of federal representatives. I turn, that is, from the new and the novel, and from civic genres especially subject to public meta-generic uptakes, to another part of the scene: evolution in the established and familiar;

and in civic genres especially subject to institutional forces and to uptakes within structured “genre systems” (Devitt, 1991; Bazerman, 1994.)

The shared sense of what petitioning is all about—of how to write a petition, whom to petition, how to solicit signatures, why to sign, and what might happen—is local knowledge of rhetorical situation and genre. Genre theory has shown that local knowledge of situation, form, content, timing, and participants determines the shared recognition of what we can do (“what ends we may have” (Miller, 1984, 165)), and of what others are doing. This local knowledge, genre theory has suggested, comes from repeated experience of those genres and the problems they address and from our interactions with other people as they encounter those same problems and genres. Genre theory has often turned to concepts of sociality like “discourse community,” “community of practice,” and so on to describe how it is that we come to share such knowledge with some people but not others. We may rely also on meta-genre (Giltrow, 2002) to affirm or fill in our image of a genre. All of these observations from within genre theory show us that genre is local. Online genres, too, appear in many ways products of local knowledge emerging from shared experience of situations and discourse types. Reading in the online edition of the *Vancouver Sun*, for example, about its online petition to the NHL (asking it to allow beloved goalie Roberto Luongo to be officially designated captain of the Vancouver Canucks hockey team) (MacIntyre, Nov. 18, 2008), one may see at work local knowledge of situation and typified response: many people recognized the problem and the petition’s fitness as a response to that problem, and therefore signed the petition; the petition was delivered to its addressee in accordance with their expectations.

As with the homeless blog, however, opportunities for innovation are challenging such local knowledge. For one, CMD fosters discourses of global action; it encourages people, for instance, to protest globally—to create and sign petitions, emails, and so on that address people beyond the local. Moreover, in multiple localities, petitioning appears to be in a period of renewed and widespread appeal, and of change. In this period of renewal, technologies that are enabling new ways of petitioning also publicize and circulate those changes beyond the local. CMD exposes people in new ways to petitioners and petition practices from elsewhere. Sitting at one's computer reading the *Vancouver Sun* article online and feeling a pull to participate (even if just as a reader) in online petitioning, one may open a new window and go to any number of free petition sites, where one will encounter petitions from multiple localities. Addressed to the Australian government, the state of Washington, Polaroid, BBC1, the mayor of Toronto and the New York city council, these petitions may diverge significantly from petitions that one might be asked to sign in one's neighbourhood. Such petitions are created and signed by rhetors with their own knowledge of what petitions look like and how they work in their local context—and of how technologically-enabled changes fit or do not fit with what they know about “effective” petitions.

The local contexts in which practices make sense, however, are sometimes obscured. Through exposure to conventions that are local to other geopolitical contexts or local to online contexts, rhetors may become involved in alternative practices which appear fitting but may not be fitting to the local rhetorical situation. It is this tension between local genre knowledge (what we know about how a genre looks and works “around here”) and CMD's circulation of new and extra-local ways of doing things that

challenges rhetors and genre theorists. Moreover, this tension has implications for the kinds of civic participation, opportunities for citizenship, and new modes of democracy hoped for by governments, lay people, and scholars. On the one hand, rhetors draw on local knowledge of an established and familiar genre like the petition addressed to their federal government; on the other, through CMD, they experience technologically-enabled new ways of doing what appears to be the same things that issue from (or have different meanings) elsewhere. How do rhetors navigate the tension between these two sets of knowledge and experience? How is the evolution of genres constrained by local systems and histories—as genre theory has suggested—and expectations of the subjects producing those genres (as I have suggested in Chapter Three that we must pay more attention to), versus conventions which become attached to media and technology beyond that local?

### *Outline*

In the first part of this chapter, I examine how petitioning (and now electronic petitioning) has invited and continues to invite change, and look historically at conflict over how petitioning evolves to serve new people and purposes. I turn in the remainder of the chapter to examining the tension between local genre knowledge and technologically-enabled changes in the case of a local genre: the Canadian petition to the House of Commons. Analyzing the House of Commons' responses to challenges posed by e-petitioning, I ask whether a “genre system” situated in an institution like the House of Commons may accommodate or attempt to shut down change. I then ask how rhetors in such a context respond to possibilities for change. When faced with new ways to petition, what do Canadian petitioners do, and how do they know how to proceed when faced with the need to create or sign a petition? Drawing on a corpus of electronic petitions taken

from two free e-petition websites, I ask which local practices Canadian electronic petitioners follow, and with what potential effects.

*Part One: Local and Extra-Local Ways of Writing*

*The Petition and Change: Ancient Rights, New Voices, and Digital Clipboards*

Though petitioning is an old, familiar, and distinguished discourse practice dating back to the Middle Ages, one which might seem stable and conservative, historical examination shows the petition as both an agent and subject of change. Interest in petitioning at junctures in the genre's history has surged as petitions have appealed to people as a way to bring about or to manage change. In offering change, this familiar and established genre opens itself to new users, purposes, and features. In Canada, for instance, as in many other places, citizens have a longstanding, "ancient and undoubted" right to petition their government, that is, to communicate directly with their highest political officials. Historically, inhabitants of Canada have indeed treated petitioning as an endeavour worth time and effort. These uses have been both familiar and new. For instance, though First Nations chiefs at the turn of the century were not among those who had historically petitioned English monarchs, First Nations chiefs from the BC interior in 1913 created a petition addressing both the king and the prime minister on land title issues. Turning to the petition to manage changes in their relationship to land and government, they petitioned against a specific action (the Canadian government's move to have land title questions settled by the Reserve Commission rather than a higher authority). The genre was treated in the petition text as a serious and legitimate civic right even though its authors and signatories were not enfranchised citizens; the petition text

reminds its addressees of prior petitions, implying censure for government's failure to heed those petitions (Chiefs of the Interior Tribes, 1913). In offering these users of the genre a way to pursue change, the genre also proved itself open to change.

Since the 1980s, the petition appears again to be robust, appealing to new users with new purposes. Recent vigorous interest in the petition suggests that this is an important period in the history of the genre, a period when citizens are taking up the civic resources open to them in new ways, and when there is some question about how responses to these attempts may shape acts of citizenship in Canada. The chapter on petitioning in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* itself—the guide provided to both the public and MPs, written by a former Clerk (Robert Marleau) and Deputy Clerk (Camille Montpetit)—points out that the number of petitions submitted to the House jumped dramatically in the early 1980s (from three petitions in 1979 to 185 in 1983-4 to 3899 in 1984-86 and 5575 in 1986-88) and continues to be high (Montpetit & Marleau, 2000.) In a Feb 3, 2005 address to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, one committee member describes Canadians' use of this right: "It's important for us to emphasize," she asserts, "the question of the culture of petitions. It's very well established in this country. During the 15-year period from April 1989 to December 2004, more than 30,000 paper petitions were presented in the House." With the advent of new technologies, this upsurge in petitioning in Canada has continued; the petition continues to appear the agent and subject of change even as it is a familiar and established genre.

Modern communications technologies, beginning with the fax machine (which allowed circulating unsigned petition pages more quickly, and raised the possibility that

completed petitions could be faxed to their addressees), have promised to make petitioning a newly useful tool. With the more widespread use of the internet by average folk, email seemed to enhance petitioning in significant ways. “Email petitions” began arriving in one’s inbox pleading for one to “act now!”, to cut and paste the addresses into a new email and circulate the petitions to as many people as possible. But these innovations were often rejected: both addressees and people invited to sign email petitions measured the genre against their local knowledge of what petitions were, what they looked like, and how they worked—the kind of knowledge you consulted above when deciding whether or not to sign the coffee shop owner’s petition. In the end, the email petition was widely criticized as “spam” and as completely ineffectual: the digital text could be easily altered, no one was ultimately responsible for the petition, and there was no reasonable way of verifying signatures. Theresa Heyd (forthcoming) calls these an instance of “digital folklore forwardables,” a “super-genre” which she suggests contains playful, ludic genres such as email hoaxes and “You know you’re X if you’re Y” jokes—in other words, as something not very serious, and certainly not very civic. In the face of resistance and local genre knowledge, email petitions have largely died away. The genre invites change, but change may also be also shut down.

The promise of the technological improvement—even the transformation—of petitioning continues to fuel both change and resistance to change. Online petitioning has evolved: *electronic* petitions have emerged and garnered a strong following. These are petitions often hosted by websites like Petition Online, GoPetition, Care2Petition, IPetitions, and ePetitions.net, sites which, generally speaking, give indications that they intend for electronic petitions to serve the same ends as paper petitions, and signal their

belief that they can do so in an enhanced fashion. These allow authors to create petitions whose wordings usually cannot be altered after their publication on the site and which remain located at stable URLs. The URLs may circulate via email, but the petition itself do not: signatories sign on the website, not in an email. Sites design their petition templates and the processes of petition creating and signing to resemble those of paper petitions. They stress that, unlike email petitions, the petitions are lodged in one location only and are thus secure and therefore authentic. Moreover, signatures can be “verified” by sending a confirmation email to the signatory. In many other ways as well, these online petitions mimic paper petitions. For instance, the petitions are available in printer-friendly forms (you can print them yourself or pay the site to do it).

The first epigraph above, which comes from a free petition service website called PetitionOnline, shows the promise that online petitioning is seen by many to have and points toward a new tension between local genre knowledge and technologically-enabled innovation. The metaphor of the clipboard “that can be everywhere at once, never gets rained on, never runs out of signature forms,” and so on represents the kind of enthusiasm appearing widely on free petition sites like PetitionOnline. The clipboard is a metaphor for the “affordances”—to return to Donald Norman’s (1988, 1999) way of describing how materials encourage or permit some uses and not others—of digital text. Electronic petitions can take advantage of affordances that paper does not offer. Graphics capabilities, for instance, afford the display of images and text. Digital text affords transmission across vast distances more quickly, easily, and cheaply than paper. Software for counting data entries affords an ongoing and up to date tally of signatures, while other technologies afford the display of that tally on a screen. Email programs afford

communication with signatories. The petition site software affords having one central location for a document, where the ability to alter the text can be strictly controlled. The petition invites change, and appears open to change—but as responses to the email petition show, there may be tension between the promise of change and local knowledge of genre features.

*17,000 Signatures Rejected: “Perceived Affordances” and Genre as Local*

What has made people reject one kind of innovation and embrace another? As I said at the start of this chapter, genre theory has shown that people’s knowledge of what genres are and how they work is intersubjective and local. We might expect that responses to genre innovation would also be locally grounded and meaningful.

Responses to innovations in electronic petitioning shows that in many ways, this is indeed so, even though some rhetors may act as if technologically-enabled “improvements” transcend locality. In spite of features shared by petitions in many localities, local governments continue to be called upon to respond to citizens’ uses of the affordances—or “perceived affordances”—offered by fax machines, email, electronic petitioning software, etc., adaptations that themselves occur in response to local histories, needs, and concerns. The second epigraph to this chapter demonstrates that such “improvements” to genres do not transcend locality. On May 29, 2000, during the time allotted for MPs to present petitions to the House of Commons, MP Pierre Brien attempted to present an e-petition for tabling:

**Mr. Pierre Brien (Témiscamingue, BQ):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw the House’s attention to something that concerns the tabling of petitions.

Very often individuals or lobby groups signing petitions forward them to us for tabling here in this House.

However, in today's context, with the development of new means of communication, petitions may come in different forms. This has happened with me.

One individual has presented an electronic petition, on CD-ROM, with over 17,000 names. Mr. Goyette, a resident of Montreal, in Quebec, collected, through electronic means, 17,000 signatures. That petition, like the one I tabled earlier, asks the government to take action regarding the gasoline pricing issue. This type of petition does not quite comply with the current rules of the House, more specifically with Standing Order 36.

I am asking the Chair whether it would be possible to get a very broad interpretation of this provision of the standing orders or, if it is deemed more appropriate, to have the standing orders amended or updated so that in the future Canadians can use such means.

...

Considering that people can now file their personal income tax return by using the Internet, it seems to me that the House of Commons should review its standing orders to make it possible to table petitions in that format. (Canada, May 29, 2000) (sic)

Brien's concerns show a tension between Canadians using the digital clipboard in good faith and House of Commons regulations rejecting digital signatures: critically, the Clerk of Petitions will not approve a petition unless it "contain[s] only original signatures and

addresses written directly onto the petition and not pasted thereon or otherwise transferred to it” (Standing Order 36.1 (f)), and digital signatures do not count as “original signatures.” Brien’s colleague MP Michel Bellehumeur, following up, requests that the House accept the petition even though it violates Standing Order 36. According to House rules, an MP may attempt to present a petition that has not been certified by the Clerk of Petition; if Members unanimously accept the move, the petition may be tabled (Moore, 2008, personal communication)<sup>40</sup>. However, since some Members of the House refuse the request in this case, the petition cannot be tabled: 17,000 signatures fail to find the same uptake as the signatures on the paper petition Brien tables on the same topic, gasoline pricing.

Here, we begin to see that the affordance of digital text promises improvement, and appears to some petitioners to fit their idea of what a petition *can* look like—but *improvement* collides with other influences in the local life of the genre. Canadian petitioners’ exposure to other ways of doing things, their response to the promise of change—in this case, of a new way to speak out about gasoline pricing—appears to set them up for failure.

#### *Local Adaptations to E-Petitioning Affordances: Digital Signatures Abroad*

Examining the treatment of digital signatures in petitions by free petition sites and other governments, we can observe how technologically-enabled and circulated changes to petitioning pose a challenge for rhetors and for our understanding of genre evolution.

We can see in the treatment of digital signatures something new: first, that affordances

---

<sup>40</sup> If the House unanimously approves a petition previously rejected by the Clerk of Petitions, “it is an order of the House that the petition may be presented and it is certified after the fact. The government will also be required to present a reply to the petition as per the Standing Orders” (Moore, personal communication, 2008).

are perceived in some places and not others, and second, that local *adaptations* to those affordances diverge and are grounded in local contexts in ways that pose special challenges.

Official government responses to electronic petitioning have varied worldwide. Unlike Canada's House of Commons, several governments worldwide—the Scottish Parliament, the Australian Senate, the UK Prime Minister's office, and the German Bundestag (Parliament)—accept electronic petitions in some form. The Australian Senate began accepting electronic petitions hosted by any kind of petition site, as did some US states. In Europe, the then-newly-formed Scottish Parliament began testing the first government-run electronic petitioning service website in 1999 where petitioners could create, sign, and debate electronic petitions. This was followed by a similar site run by the office of the UK prime minister to supplement petitions traditionally delivered by hand to #10 Downing St, the street address of the prime minister. In September 2005, Germany's parliament followed suit by setting up a pilot e-petitioning service on its website; it imported the petitioning system used by the Scottish Parliament, which was developed and implemented by the International Teledemocracy Centre.<sup>41</sup>

Although Canada's House of Commons does not accept digital signatures as “original signatures,” these government sites, as well as free petition sites, do—they perceive that digital text affords “signing” documents. All except Scotland, discussed below, have developed conventional means of verifying digital signatures. Signatories

---

<sup>41</sup>In addition, several such sites promote electronic petitioning not only by accepting electronic petitions via their own websites but also by offering the petition software free of charge to be used on other sites. The UK site, for instance, uses open source software provided by the organization My Society; the open source code can be used and adapted by others as long as they in turn make the source code available to others (EPetitions: facts, figures and progress; June 20, 2007.) The online petitioning service of the Scottish Parliament offers its software, as do free sites Care2 petition.com, iPetition.com, and E-petition.com.

first fill out an online form with both required and optional data (name, address, profession, comments, etc.); this data varies according to the petition service and the choices of the petition author. Signatories may also sometimes have the option of making some of that information publicly viewable or only viewable by the person to whom the petition will be delivered. After filling out the form, would-be signatories are most commonly then sent a “verification email” in which they must click a link to finalize their signature. This method—the verification email—prevents computer programs from signing petitions multiple times; it also ensures that the person using the email to sign the petition is truly the user of that email address.

To put this in Norman’s terms, in his distinction between “affordances” and “perceived affordances,” such agents perceive the affordance of digital text differently than the Canadian House of Commons. In an article published in 1999 in response to uptakes of his 1990 book *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman entreats readers to bear in mind the difference between an “affordance” and a “perceived affordance”:

Please don’t confuse affordances with perceived affordances. Don’t confuse affordances with conventions. Affordances reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects: they are properties of the world. Conventions, conversely, are arbitrary, artificial, and learned. Once learned, they help us master the intricacies of daily life, whether they be conventions for courtesy, for writing style, or for operating a word processor. (1999, 42)

Affordances are properties of materials (paper and bark *can be written on*); perceived affordances are properties that are perceived—and hence local knowledge of a thing (paper is for writing on); conventions are socially-agreed-upon ways of being that do not

in themselves come from a thing (we have a convention that we write thank-you notes on paper, rather than electronically). Local knowledge may inform when we perceive an affordance and how we perceive it can be used—more so, perhaps, with some materials and media than others: while “[w]ood is normally used for solidity, opacity, support, or carving” (affordance and perceived affordance often lining up nicely and similarly across localities), the “fundamental properties” of a new technology “that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” are, arguably, more open to competing perceptions. MP Brien’s experience with the 17,000 petitioners and Standing Order 36, for example, shows that the “fundamental properties” of digital text, and the ways that digital text “could possibly be used,” are subject to competing interpretations with regard to its ability to represent an “original” signature: few would disagree that pen and paper afford original signatures. I therefore use the term “perceived affordances” rather than “affordances” from this point on to underline the fact that “just how the thing could possibly be used” is subject to local knowledge.

As Norman’s distinction above hints, it is not only the perceived affordance that varies, however. Local *adaptations* to the perceived affordances of digital signatures also vary.<sup>42</sup> A different method for handling signatures appears on GoPetition; instead of

---

<sup>42</sup> To see the difference between an affordance, a perceived affordance, and a conventional use of a perceived affordance, we can consider the combination of digital text and blogging software. At a basic level, this combination affords the manipulation and display of digital text and images, as with a webpage, affords doing so quickly, and affords adding new material without permanently displacing old material. Two perceived affordances of blogging that result are the capacity for creating multiple posts on an ongoing basis, and for displaying all posts made on the blog. These perceived affordances routinely result in a conventional use of these perceived affordances: having posts arranged in reverse chronological order (one can, in fact, arrange for blog posts to appear in other orders, or even for previous blog posts to disappear rather than be arranged in any order.) This is in part because it is often the default option set up by administrators, in part because of the association of blogging with diary-writing (since diaries are arranged in reverse chronological order), and in part because most people arrange their blogs this way. All three of these—affordances, perceived affordances, and conventions (adaptations to perceived affordances)—are at work in shaping how people blog—or petition.

sending a verification email, the service requires signatories to correctly type in letters corresponding to a “captcha”—a textual image that can only be seen by the human eye—in order to keep computer programs from automatically filling in the petition form. This adaptation verifies that signatories are human but not that they are in any sense who they say they are. The Scottish Parliament’s handling of digital signatures shows another local adaptation at work, one which demonstrates the role that local values and priorities play in driving adaptations to perceived affordances. Like several other governments, the Scottish Parliament responded to the perceived affordance of digital text by seeing an opportunity for citizens to “sign” digitally. However, it diverges from other localities in the information it requires to verify the digital signature. The Scottish Parliament’s electronic petition changed a longstanding feature of the petition when it was decided not to require signatories to have an email account that could be used to verify that the signature was indeed “authentic.” This was done out of a desire to promote as open access as possible to the service—promoting the democratic function of the genre over all other concerns.<sup>43</sup> Instead, signatories are required to provide address, town/city, postal code, and country.<sup>44</sup> In these two examples, we see adaptations to perceived affordances guided by local values and priorities—in the Scottish case, local democratic values and priorities in the first years of its newly formed Parliament.

---

<sup>43</sup> Scotland’s emphasis on open access is also reflected in its decision that petitioners do not need to use any particular computer to access the site and sign a petition (Mcintosh, 2000). (This is in contrast to governments like the Athens municipal government which only allow citizens to access e-government services from sanctioned public terminals (Taylor & Burt, 1999, 515).)

<sup>44</sup> Only name and country can be viewed by the public.

*Technology and the Local: New Problems for Genre*

Developments like these demonstrate emerging cultures of electronic petitioning. These are shaped in part by perceived affordances of the medium and in part by widely felt social needs that the petition, when combined with new features like comments boxes and digital text, seems to meet. While local relationships between genre and perceived affordances may seem just that—local, other people’s ways of doing things not relevant outside local borders—electronic petitioning suggests that genre theory now needs to account in new ways for how other people’s ways of doing things inform our own.

For one, such technological innovation challenges genre theory because it spreads new conditions for writing—new affordances and conventions—across diverse and widespread communities. These sites are a place where users from many communities petition and are exposed to others’ petitioning practices. Petitioning sites provide a forum for the mixing of local petitioning practices where the local geopolitical origins and contexts of those practices may in fact be obscured: Australians, Canadians, Spaniards, Scots, and so on, all of whose countries treat petitioning (particularly electronic petitioning) differently, are exposed to people petitioning very different kinds of audiences (municipal, federal, media, corporations), whose expectations of petitioning also vary. Uptakes by both users and institutions may be informed by practices issuing from other localities, but those practices’ roots in local values and histories may not be transparent to users encountering them online. Users’ practices on the sites are removed from the local contexts that would inform or remind other users of those differences and the contexts in which those differences are fitting for the local genre. In addition, other CMD can direct users *to* such petitions: emails, news items, hyperlinks from other online

texts, and so on direct internet users to petitions with new technologically-enabled features—but those petitions and features may be “foreign.”

Moreover, online petitioning sites and online culture *themselves* may be generative of their own local rhetorical conventions. Laura Gurak's discussion of online protests against two proposed software initiatives (the "Clipper Chip" and the LotusMarketPlace software) underlines the potential power of an *online locality* in civic action. Her study looks at how community *ethos* on the internet permits public sphere participants to accept flawed and unproven data as persuasive and rational. Gurak suggests that such ethos local to online communities can be generative but can also be restricting: "Group *ethos*," she observes, "can also leave out or ostracize those who do not agree with the majority, and this problem is often enhanced by the specialized nature of electronic discussion lists" (247). My examination of the e-petition suggests an additional problem to the one Gurak identifies. Users may adapt to perceived affordances online, developing local conventions that in turn inform what other rhetors “know” about genres encountered online—but those conventions and resulting expectations may be incommensurate with the offline versions of those genres.

What is most significant, these petitioners (authors or signatories) exposed to new petitioning practices (practices viable in online communities or in other geopolitical contexts) do not interact in the ways that genre theory describes occurring in “discourse communities,” “communities of practice,” and so forth. It is technology, rather than interaction and shared experience of problems and contexts, that often forms the basis for mutual experience of “petitioning.” Rhetors are exposed to extra-local practices of types they have not experienced before and are removed from the conditions of sociality that

might help them understand and evaluate the contexts of those practices. On top of this, they are often explicitly invited to overlook local differences, becoming global citizens by participating in global protests. Free online petition sites challenge people's sense of petitioning as local by inviting people from *all* localities both to *be* citizens—to inhabit citizenship by taking up a civic genre, as I discuss more fully later—and to *act* civically—to effect change in ways they could not before, garnering more support as well as seeking and offering support beyond the local.

A final problem arising from the possibility of doing things in new ways is that one group of participants involved in a field of activity may be quicker and less conservative than another in taking up perceived affordances to accomplish familiar actions. Petitioners, for example, are often quicker to adapt to new perceived affordances than governments, and to develop practices that challenge government to respond. This may create an occasion for conflict, particularly as some participants may develop practices not in line with others' expectations. A historical example of early uses of the telephone by patients soliciting advice from doctors shows this in action along with one possible outcome. In her study of responses to "electric technologies" like the telephone and telegraph, Carolyn Marvin describes how, with the advent of the telephone into family homes, doctors began to complain that though patients would never walk into an office asking for free advice, they were doing so over the telephone (Marvin, 1988, 88). Patients, perceiving an affordance that allowed them to get advice without face-to-face appointments (and the payment they entailed), embraced innovation in advance of doctors.

As I suggested at the start of this chapter, genre theorists have shown how genre knowledge arises from repeated experience of ways of writing to meet communally-recognized needs, and from our interactions with other people as they encounter those same needs and ways of writing. They have worked most often from the belief that the values, needs, ideological bases, and power relations within a community (a discourse community, a community of practice, a workplace, etc.) will guide how changes are accepted, how intersubjective knowledge of genres changes and declines. In this view, new genre features may appear, or community members may attempt to do things in a new way, but these attempts are subject to local (community) knowledge. Genre theory might account for patients' innovative but conflict-causing use of the telephone by noting that the doctor-patient interview reproduces ideological beliefs about participants' places in social hierarchy; it might also remind us that though we need to be alert to "flexibility, adaptiveness, innovation, and the evolution of genres" (Coe, Lingard, & Teslenko, 2002, 4), we also need to be aware of how genres reproduce power relations within a community and that flexibility and adaptiveness will be constrained by those power relations (Coe, Lingard, & Teslenko, 2002, 4). Contemporary norms regarding phone calls to the doctor indeed show that the community arranged for shared understandings of and responses to patient uses of the telephone for medical consultation. Likewise, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, patients take up email as a way to contact doctors (sometimes not even their own doctors) for advice—innovating in response to perceived affordances. Doctors, as genre theory predicts, in turn work out responses in their community. Medical communities discuss and make decisions regarding this new practice (patient emails), via

articles in medical journals (Borowitz & Wyatt, 1998; Eysenbach & Diepgen 1998; Spielberg 1998).

Theories of discourse community and communities of practice, however, focus on learning and acculturation, not on the circulation of technologically-pushed changes across localities. Looking only to “discourse community,” “community of practice,” and so on as the mediators of change to local genre knowledge does not fully account for genre evolution. The evolution of electronic petitioning raises a new question for genre theorists and for those invested in genres like petitioning: what happens when rhetors are exposed to conventional uses of perceived affordances which issue from outside the local? That is, how do those invested in genres like the petition (in this case, citizens, media, and members of government) navigate the challenges, identified above, to their knowledge of how things *are done* and of what *is possible*?

#### *Monitoring Change in the Petition: What’s at Stake?*

Observing how people have used the petition to pursue change in the past, and how resulting changes to the petition have been received, suggests what is at stake in answering this question, and points to possible dynamics of resistance to change. Looking historically at two examples of petitions’ use by marginalized groups and uptakes of those uses shows how the petition invites innovation but also underlines the power that an institution may have over the petition’s evolution. Accounts of petitioning in anti-slavery (Zaeske, 2003) and suffrage movements (Smith, 1984) suggest that upsurges of petitioning, particularly when these are associated with particular kinds of petitioners or with changes to some element of the genre, may prove an occasion for governments to resist such petitions. They may do so by generating rules that restrict the kinds of

responses or “uptakes” the petitions may garner. The use of petitioning for enhancing citizenship, for instance, may be met with the formulation of new rules which codify older informal practices. In her discussion of *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*, Olivia Smith discusses petitioning’s appeal to marginalized groups and identifies how government resisted this by creating new rules about features of the genre. She describes the use of petitions for campaigns to extend suffrage or to grant universal male suffrage. These acts of petitioning failed to be ratified: on many occasions, Parliament simply refused to accept them. A new requirement for the genre was introduced: “Between 1797 and 1818...Parliament dismissively refused to admit petitions *because of the language in which they were written*” (130; emphasis mine). Until this upsurge of petitions for universal suffrage, Smith notes, there had never been requirements that the language of petitions be “decent and respectful...”. This “new requirement for petitions” (31) was applied unevenly, operating as a tool against the marginalized petitioners looking for a “wedge,” to use Susan Zaeske’s term from her discussion of marginalized American petitioners, into the political arena.

Zaeske discusses how the “radical potential of petitioning” was used in the United States by petitioners “as an entering wedge into various realms of political power” (7). Her discussion shows another way that government exercised power over genre evolution. She describes the petition’s usefulness for women, who did not yet have the vote, in their protests against the removal of Cherokee people from their lands and then later against slavery—usefulness that translated into high levels of participation in petitioning: between 1831 and 1863, about three million signatures were collected. This high level of participation in turn led to changes in the genre: for instance, anti-slavery

petitions were some of first *collective* and *political* petitions by women in the United States (as opposed to personal petitions submitted by individual women). The new collective approach to petitioning went hand in hand with important changes to their petitions' tone (Zaeske, 2003, 2). This latter change to the genre in particular was imbricated in changes to women's political status:

This change in the rhetoric of female antislavery petitions and appeals, from a tone of humility to a tone of insistence, reflected an ongoing transformation of the political identity of signers from that of subjects to that of citizens. Having encouraged women's involvement in national politics, women's antislavery petitioning created an appetite for further political participation and more rights.

(Zaeske, 2003, 2)

However, the potential destabilizing force of this shift in political identity and activity led to a stabilizing response which played out in official uptakes of the genre. In the case Zaeske describes, the upsurge and its success (in terms of appetite for citizenship and political participation) led to a "gag rule" in June 1836 "that immediately tabled all petitions on the subject of slavery" (Zaeske, 2003, 11). Effectively, the gag rule kept the petitions from following the usual pattern of uptake. Instead of being presented in the House, petitions were immediately and silently shuffled "to the table." This meant that petitioners' requests—and the government's obligation to respond—were not publicly acknowledged.

These examples show the power of institutional responses to the genre and the ways that petitions have needed to arrange for very particular kinds of responses within a tightly-monitored system of activity. They also show that changes to the genre were

resisted as part of resistance to the new political status of marginal groups that these changes promised to further. These two observations suggest that as we look at electronic petitions—a new instance in which petitioning is taken up with vigour and is transforming (thanks to CMD) for new needs and users—we need to consider how petitioners anticipate such responses, and how those involved in the tightly-monitored system of the House of Commons respond to potentially challenging genre innovation.

*Part Two: The Canadian House of Commons Petition as a Local Case*

*Social Actions of the Petition*

With these things in mind, I turn now to a full examination of electronic petitioning in the Canadian context. To understand the evolution of petitioning in the face of new technologies and diverse users, we need first to know what functions such petitions serve in the Canadian context.

*Petitioning as political input.* Perhaps the most recognizable “social action” (Miller, 1984/1994) of petitioning is providing citizens with political input into government policy and lawmaking. This function flows from the genre’s history as a request for action, “a formal request to an authority for redress of a grievance,” the description with which *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* begins (Marleau & Monpetit, 2000). Indeed, without a “prayer,” or request, a petition does not *petition*. Historically, the petition was a way for subordinates to appeal to their superiors and, importantly, to compel some kind of response: the petition carried no obligation that the request be carried out, but those petitioned were expected to respond.

In making requests directly of the House, petitions ostensibly help to stop proposed bills or to encourage policy changes by giving MPs a way to signal the will of

the people and to argue against (or even delay) acts of government. *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, the meta-generic document produced by the government for the public and for MPs, suggests that this is an appropriate way to describe the current function of petitions in Canada:

Petitions today may be described as a *vehicle for political input*, a way of *attempting to influence policy-making and legislation* and also, judging by their continued popularity, a valued means of bringing public concerns to the attention of Parliament. Petitions also have their place among the *tools which Members and Ministers can use to formulate public policy* and to carry out their representative duties. (Marleau & Monpetit, 2000; emphasis mine)

While skeptics may dismiss petitions as a sham and waste of time, MPs in the Canadian House do use petitions to promote, argue against, or even stall policy in the daily business of the House.<sup>45</sup>

*Petitioning and citizen subjects.* Through its acceptance as a right of citizenship and as direct communication between citizens and their government, the petition to the House of Commons performs a second important social action, that of producing citizen subjects. Rhetorical theories of genre have unfolded the socially constructive nature of genre—the way that producing genres also produces the subject positions associated with them. Bazerman, taking this insight to civic genres, proposes that being able to take up the "forms of public advocacy" (2002, 26) online enhances access to citizenship. In emphasizing the civic character of the petition, meta-genre invites petitioners to feel that

---

<sup>45</sup> In 1983, for instance, MPs in the New Democratic Party (NDP) presented several hundreds of petitions, many of them on the same topic, over the course of several days, not only drawing attention to the issue in the petition but, equally importantly, taking up time so that other business of the House could not go forward.

in producing the genre, they are enhancing their own experience of inhabiting the subject position of “citizen.” Canadian House meta-genre emphasizes the civic nature of the petition genre by repeatedly describing it as an ancient right of citizenship; the epigraph from 1947 House Speaker Gaspard Fauteux to the chapter on petitions in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* sets the tone:

All authorities agree that the right of petitioning parliament for redress of grievances is acknowledged as a fundamental principle of the constitution. It has been uninterruptedly exercised from very early times and has had a profound effect in determining the main forms of parliamentary procedure.

Petitioning is cast as a civic act when it is described as genuine communication between citizens and their representatives, “one of the most direct means of communication between the people and Parliament” (Marleau & Monpetit, 2000).

Historical examples indeed show that taking up the petition, as author or signatory, has offered a way to participate in citizenship more fully in the Canadian context. Selena Crosson, for example, in her work on agrarian feminism between WWI and WWII, points out that post-enfranchisement agrarian feminist organizations did not cease their feminist activities after enfranchisement, but in fact exercised their roles as citizens by actively seeking a great number of policy changes and social goals. Strikingly, one of the ways they continued to act as citizens was to petition: in 1931, the Saskatchewan Peace Committee coordinated with other local women’s groups and with women’s groups abroad for world disarmament. In Canada, these prairie women travelled out in communities until the end of December, both in urban areas and over long distances, even to immigrant communities where language was a

struggle. By these heroic efforts, as well as publishing and sending out forms from the *Western Producer*, Saskatchewan women collected 17, 917 signatures... (Crosson, 2008, 13)

Also important for thinking about the evolution of petitioning in the Canadian context, this local effort was part of a larger global effort; women's groups worldwide coordinated their petitioning efforts. Though "Sadly, the Agreement was not passed" (Crosson, 2008), the coordinated and extraordinary act of petitioning by these women in effect *extended* these women's citizenship. It was, first of all, an act of local citizenship—the genre consolidating these women's position as civic actors that had been recognized by the granting of suffrage. What is more, as an act of global citizenship, it extended women's citizenship beyond their initial achievement of suffrage.

*Petitioning and community.* Finally, petitioning, not a solitary act of writing but a collaborative one involving author(s), people soliciting signatures, and signatories themselves, and often involving discussion in public venues, informs and builds communities. The prototypical image of petitioning in Canada is of petitioners going out into the community to solicit the support of others, not only through the petition text itself (which lays out a problem and request) but by informing community members via conversation and supporting documents. MP Andre Gagnon draws on this image when he describes how the Modernization Committee (discussed later in this chapter) approached difficult questions regarding possible formats for an electronic petitioning site in Canada. He reports of the proposed e-petition site that

At the end [of the petition text] you would have the principal petitioner's name and the province where that person came from.

We played a lot with that concept, but when we had difficulty with how to answer the different questions, *we always came back to the mall experience. When a person at the mall is asking you to sign a petition, you see that person--at least you know that person.* In this case, we found it important that the name of the person and the province where that person came from appeared there, so *the principal petitioner was known by the person wanting to sign the petition.*

(emphasis mine) (Hansard, Standing Committee, Feb 3, 2005)

Gagnon's remarks highlight the public dialogue within the community that petitioning often involves. Soliciting signatures may sometimes happen in private, but it often involves public requests for support. In addition, Gagnon's example highlights the need for petitioners to "know" the petitioner in some sense—that is, to "know" in the sense of being able to place him or her within a community context; in so knowing and being known as community members (as local subjects), the act of signing is not only a show of support for the cause, but a public act of solidarity with the petition author, his/her agents, and other signatories who can witness the act.

### *Local Genre Knowledge: System and Features of the Canadian House of Commons*

#### *Petition*

If technological affordances appear to some to make the petition serve these needs better than before, Zaeske's and Smith's observations remind us that petitions are vulnerable and that changes to petitioning introduced by petitioners themselves may be resisted by those who receive the petition. In order to achieve the social actions outlined above, petitions to the House of Commons arrange for possible and likely uptakes within the federal government. How do petitioners arrange for their petitions to become official

documents in the House of Commons? In the early stages of the petitioning process, petitioners may approach the Clerk of Petitions with a draft, checking that their petition meets requirements; they may consult official guidelines or guidelines produced by third parties (for example, those posted online by Canadian lawyer referral service CanLaw (CanLaw, 2008)); they may also, finally, approach an MP beforehand to see if he or she will present it when completed. Or they may simply compose and circulate a petition based on their sense of what a petition looks like, what it does, and how one goes about petitioning. All of these demonstrate local genre knowledge—either of the features and social actions of a petition, or of the genre system and meta-genre of the petition. All petition authors, however, must deliver completed petitions to a Member of Parliament (often, but not always, their own), asking the Member to present the petition in the House of Commons. Since 1986, petitions need to be approved by the Clerk of Petitions prior to being presented in the House (rather than afterward, as was the case before); the Clerk may accept or reject a petition, at this time possibly producing recommendations for the petitioners on how to amend the petition. If approved, the Member of Parliament can present it to the House of Commons during a 15 minute time period allotted to the presentation of petitions. The petition is subsequently “tabled,” making its way into the official sequence of genres.

From there, the petition goes to a relevant government agency or department, which is responsible for preparing a response to the petition within 45 days. Within the 45 day period, the official response is given back to the Member who presented it, who then tables the response in the House of Commons. That response becomes a “sessional paper,” part of the *Journals* which citizens can look up and read. At some point a petition

(official or not) might also be cited by Members in their arguments and debates, particularly if the petition is a response to a bill or other matter being discussed in the House at that time. However, “[b]oth the presentation of the certified petition and the tabling of the government response,” the Clerk of Petition points out,

are *official actions of the House* and are recorded as such in the Journals of the House. If a Member makes reference to a petition during the course of debate *no official action takes place*. (Moore, 2008; emphasis mine)

That is, strict guidelines enforce the petition’s entry into the system of “official actions”—actions which compel uptakes arranged for by those same guidelines.

#### *Anticipating Uptake: “Genre System” and Accepted Features*

Petitioners anticipate possible and likely uptakes of their acts: in authoring or signing, they act in accordance with the responses they expect from potential signatories, the Clerk of Petitions, the MP who will be approached to endorse and present the petition, the committees who will read and respond to the petition, and, perhaps, the media. At any point, these uptakes may judge a petition fitting or not fitting: a signatory might decline to sign it because the tone is too strident; an MP might decline to present it because it contains remarks not firmly anchored in fact; the Clerk of Petitions might reject it because it does not actually contain a specific request for action—or a host of other reasons. Anticipating uptakes, that is, petition authors and signatories draw on their local knowledge of possible and likely uptakes and of the requirements of different participants in what Amy Devitt, then Charles Bazerman, called *genre system*—a way of accounting for genres’ relationships with other genres.

Devitt, observing the intertextual nature of genres used by tax accountants, characterizes these professional genres as forming a “system” or “set” (1991, 340). Like Devitt, Bazerman (1994) proposes that genres find meaning in a system; he suggests, moreover, that part of subjects’ genre knowledge is knowledge of this system. “[G]enres,” he suggests, “rely on our being able to recognize them and *to some degree* understand the meanings they instantiate within the systems of which they are part” (81). He gives the example of the patent: we understand what a patent is in relation to “a system of economic property” and the interrelated genres that have arisen within it to foster invention by protecting inventions’ potential to benefit their inventors. Yates and Orlikowski, writing about workplace genres—particularly in relation to the use of computers in the workplace—describe genre systems as “interlocking sequences of genres” (2002, 118). Genres like the petition have long histories and well-established places within genre systems; other such genres include genres subject to legal requirements—like Bazerman’s example of the patent—and also, importantly, genres through which people communicate with governments and other institutions (or through which institutions communicate internally, or with other institutions). For such genres, relationships with other genres in the system inform local genre knowledge—with the implication that genre innovation (including new genre features such as those introduced by technology) must account for the other genres in the system. Smith and Zaeske both observe, though not in these terms, that marginalized rhetors using petitions to extend citizenship encounter unreceptive reactions from the institution of government which restrict how those petitions are able to take their expected place in the petition’s genre system.

In order to be approved by the Clerk of Petitions, and to enter into the genre system as official documents, what features do petitions to the House of Commons need to include or avoid? A petition outlines in writing a situation and calls for action; the call for action (sometimes called the “prayer”) must contain a specific request, and must not be demanding. The petition offers the original signatures and addresses of those in agreement with the request. Appendices, photos, or attachments of any kind invalidate a petition, as do “alterations and interlineations in its text” (Standing Order 36.2 (d)). A certain tone of moderation and decorum is required. Petitions presented to Canadian governments on Canadian issues should be signed by Canadians only (rules stipulate that only a limited number of signatures from foreigners can appear in a petition addressed to the House of Commons) (Marleaux & Montpetit, 2000).

Because of Standing Order 36 and the 1986-mandated approval prior to presentation in the House, petitioners’ adaptations to the new ways of doing things they encounter are more subject to institutional constraints than some genres—like the homeless blog—where evolution is likewise driven by perceived opportunities for improvement. Online petitioners may, as we have seen, feel that e-petitions are a “fitting” response to their needs; they may (and do) produce suitably worded petitions with thousands of verifiable signatures by Canadian citizens. Here—at least on the surface—is genre as local knowledge: a set of typified and recognizable features responding to a rhetorical situation, recognized as the right thing to do and the right way to adapt to perceived affordances. However, the success of these collective efforts can be determined to some extent by a single act of rejection by the Clerk. In such cases, the petition may indeed foster community building, but fail as a demand by citizens for an answer from

their government and as a way of speaking directly to government about an urgent policy issue because it cannot enter the genre system in an official capacity.

In terms of the third social action of the petition, producing citizen subjectivity, an e-petition in this situation may continue to promise this as long as it appears a fitting response. However, this promise becomes empty if it becomes apparent that the genre does not indeed command an answer from government (as petitions historically have done and do require now in Canada according to the rules of the House.) In adapting to new perceived affordances like those offered by digital text—and perhaps in the future by wireless capabilities, voice recognition software, or other developments—rhetors are thus subject to potentially conflicting elements: the genre’s longstanding profile as a right of citizenship, their intersubjective understanding of the genre’s social actions in the Canadian context, and institutional authority that creates rules (and whose agents, such as the Clerk of Petitions, are in turn bound by those rules.) These tensions are another important corrective to the overly optimistic visions of genre remediation critiqued in Chapter Three.

*Rule-Breaking Petitioners, Crusading MPs, and the Modernization Committee: Genre Systems and Change*

In fact, however, Canadians participate in great numbers in online petitions addressed to their federal governments that violate the rules which the Clerk of Petitions must follow in certifying petitions. In such cases, these petitions fail to gain entry into the genre system in the official capacity that paper petitions can achieve. Moreover, these petitioners violate other rules set out in House Procedure and Practice—through the tone of their petitions, the inclusion of photos, URLs, and comments, and through the

solicitation of foreign signatures. Given this body of petitions, how does the genre system respond? What evidence can be found of a genre system's ability to accommodate change or to resist it?

Government responses to petitioning's evolution in fact demonstrate the tension that Bakhtin (1981) identifies in language between centrifugal and centripetal forces in language. Centripetal forces respond to the possibilities for change: change must be managed to protect how the genre functions and the roles of those involved in the genre system. On the other hand, centrifugal forces nudge at the traditional limits of the petition genre: participants in House of Commons business, such as MPs and the parties they belong to, serve as centrifugal forces by virtue of the investments they have in using the genre and the creative uses to which they put it.

Records of activities in the daily business of the House as well as of committee activities show agents within the government responding to petitioners' innovations. Around the turn of the millennium, Canadian MPs began to raise the issue of electronic petitions in the House. Pierre Brien's attempt to present his CD-ROM petition with 17,000 signatures—seen in the second epigraph—in fact came one week after discussion around parliamentary reform on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000 brought the issue of e-petitioning to the fore, with members of the Conservative Party calling for modernization. In particular, they suggested that reforms to the petitioning process could make Canada's Parliament work better for Canadians, "to connect Canadian citizens to parliament" (Hansard, May 29, 2000), or, as MP Peter MacKay put it, to "engage Canadians in a full and open fashion" (Hansard, May 29, 2000). On March 21, 2001, MP Stephane Bergeron (to recast his point in genre theory's terms) pointed to the fact that many citizens saw the petition

genre as a “fitting” response to “rhetorical exigence” but that they were thwarted by government uptake which acted centripetally on the possibilities for civic discourse:

Thought needs to be given to making the prescribed form for the presentation of petitions more flexible. This poses a serious problem with our constituents who are not necessarily up on all the parliamentary jargon and *who may spontaneously circulate a petition on a matter of public interest* and submit it to their member, only to be told that it is not in the prescribed form and cannot be presented in the House.

*This goes against the very principle whereby citizens should be able to submit petitions to the Parliament of Canada.* Something must therefore be done to make this prescribed form naturally accessible to citizens. (*Debates*, Mar. 21, 2001; emphasis mine)

Though Bergeron did not say so explicitly, his invocation of the “very principle whereby citizens should be able to submit petitions” suggested that the principles of democracy (whether direct or representative) were being thwarted in response to genre evolution. Further pushing against the rules of the House, and consolidating the image of the genre as a civic right while destabilizing the definition of “original signatures” contained in Standing Order 36, members of the Canadian House of Commons like Brien have occasionally brought an (uncertified) electronic petition into the House and tried to present it for tabling—though never successfully.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> On Nov. 26, 2004, MP Scott Reid attempted with limited success to do so with a petition on the topic of autism spectrum disorder:

As a concluding remark, I note that in addition to the petition I am presenting today, which went through the proper channels, I am in possession of an online petition containing several thousand

Calls for “modernization” continued to react against the centripetal force of Standing Order 36, in the process, however, introducing other possibilities for shaping how civic discourse might take advantage of technology. A visit to the newly formed Scottish Parliament further inspired discussion on the topic. In 2000, MP Caroline St-Hilaire made several recommendations for modernization, including one regarding e-petitions:

My third recommendation concerns electronic petitions, which we must consider too. In fact, we must remember that we are living in a modern world and that parliament must reflect this fact. (Hansard, May 29, 2000)

Subsequently, the Modernization Committee was struck to examine ways to modernize, among other things, the petition process. The committee met, discussed a number of possible initiatives, and, on Feb 3, 2005, made a presentation to the Standing House Committee on Procedure about possibilities for electronic delivery of notices and electronic petitioning. The committee reported on three options for adapting to citizen desires for e-petitioning: “the Parliamentary Internet site; a third-party site (organization or individual); or the personal site of an MP or the site of a political party” (Standing Committee, 2005)—but the bulk of their presentation focused on a model for the first option, a site run by Parliament. Government would assume complete control over ensuring authenticity in signature collection—an aspect normally left first to those collecting signatures. It would also maintain control over the petition creation process. In the proposed model, control would be enhanced by the likely inclusion of meta-generic features such as examples of good petitions. Finally, government would be able to limit

---

additional names. This second petition is not admissible under House rules, but if there were unanimous consent, I would like to introduce this as well. (*Debates*, Nov. 26, 2004)

ways that perceived affordances would be made available. For example, by only providing fillable fields for name, location, and email address, such a site would limit<sup>47</sup> how signatories might use digital text to write comments in petitions.

Their proposals for electronic notices were approved and have been subsequently put into practice. But when the meeting was adjourned, more discussion was deemed necessary on the matter of e-petitions—discussion which never occurred. The possibility for electronic petitioning in Canada has remained an open question. These developments show several factors at work in how this older, familiar genre, operating in the context of an established genre system, may evolve in the face of perceived opportunities for improving the genre via CMD. First, they show that petitioners, exposed to new ways of doing things at work in other localities, are quicker to take up perceived affordances (and adaptations to those perceived affordances) than other participants in the genre system; they are pushing against the established image of the genre and against the established ways that the genre system operates. They unsettle expectations that petitioners will follow the guidelines set out in House meta-genre in order to enter the genre system in the prescribed way, via certification and then tabling. There will, of course, always be petitions that fail to meet the regulations that the Clerk of Petitions must follow (citizens whose local genre knowledge of the petition seems insufficient). However, the scale at which this occurs with online petitioning offers a significant challenge to rules whose ostensive mandate is to ensure the smooth operation of the House in order to protect citizens' rights—including their right to direct communication with their parliament.

---

<sup>47</sup> I say “limit” rather than “control” because petitioners on the #10 Downing St. petition site occasionally creatively circumvent such restrictions by using the “name” field to write a comment instead.

Second, these developments hint that though genre evolution may be spurred by one group (petitioners, in this case) taking up new technologically-enabled ways of doing things and conventions from outside the local, the local genre system itself may monitor and move to shape genre evolution by introducing initiatives (in this case, “e-government” initiatives) which reinforce ideological assumptions and relationships associated with the genre. For example, an e-government petition site disallowing comments—a feature emerging in Canadian e-petitions, as I discuss below—may in fact block the emergence of new kinds of direct communication with government. That is, the evolution of a genre system to accommodate change may itself undermine the viability of genre innovations. Finally, these developments also show a range of groups invested in possibilities for change. This suggests that a genre system does not operate evenly against genre innovation (or against the new possibilities for citizenship that innovation in petitions may bring about, as Smith’s and Zaeske’s examples might suggest.)

In terms of the “ends” they perceive they may have, Canadian petitioners taking up their digital clipboards thus have to make their way through an unpredictable and sometimes crowded field of local and extra-local influences. Therefore, it is not enough to offer evidence that Canadians are petitioning electronically, that some of their innovations fall outside of established and ratified genre practices, that some participants in the genre system seem receptive to such genre innovation, but that centripetal responses may, in embracing “innovation” in an official capacity (via e-government initiatives) attempt to consolidate the image of the genre. Other possibilities emerge: that in taking up perceived affordances and extra-local conventions, petitioners may feel they are acting in ways consistent with the genre and the needs of the genre system; that they

may in fact be doing so; and that, in meeting the needs of other participants in the genre system, they might arrange for new ways into the relatively closed system of the House of Commons petition.

*Part Three: Canadian Petitioners Navigating Local Knowledge at Online Petition Sites*

Therefore, in this final section, I turn to the practices of Canadian petitioners themselves in more detail. I examine authorial decisions in light of a key genre in the genre system, the “presentation-of-petition.” The petition’s entry into the genre system—its achievement of official status—does not depend only on the Clerk of Petitions’ approval. Nor is petitioners’ genre knowledge limited to the petition features required to gain official approval. Genre theory has already shown that meeting formal requirements, for instance by following explicit instructions like those provided by *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, is not sufficient to guarantee success. In the case of the petition, the genre enters into close relationships with another group of rhetors and another genre (MPs and the “presentation-of-petition” they make in the House). Examining the presentation-of-petition, we see how features of one such genre (features of the petition as laid out by official rules) become useful to others. These others (like MPs) draw on the regular features of the first genre (here, the petition) to fulfill their own needs. As they do so, regular strategies and features arise in the “uptake” genre. The relationship between two genres in a genre system, therefore, also influences a genre’s evolutionary trajectory.

*A Key Public Uptake in the Genre System: The Presentation-of-Petition*

What needs, therefore, does the presentation-of-petition serve, what features is it characterized by, and what aspects of the petition lend themselves to the social actions of these uptake texts? Since 1986, petitions are presented during a maximum 15-minute period allotted once a day for that purpose. A petition may be silently tabled, that is, simply placed physically on the table at any time during the day, but this is not common. More commonly, after being recognized by the Speaker of the House, MPs orally present the petition to the House, and the petition is then tabled. Critically, the presentation-of-petition serves several needs beyond those of petitioners. It gives the MP a chance to represent his or her constituents—to make a case on their behalf by endorsing their request, by implying approval, emphasizing the numbers of the signatories, emphasizing the power of signatories as voters, and so on. Equally, in doing so the MP can *perform* his/her subject position as *representative of constituents*—that is, in addition to actually representing them, he/she can be recognized as doing so; this is particularly so if members of the constituency are present that day in the House or are following House proceedings from afar. In addition, the presentation offers the MP and/or his/her party an opportunity to publicly take a position on an issue. It also gives the MP a legitimate reason to take the floor in the House, if only for a short time, an opportunity that may be a backbencher's only chance to speak in the House. The presentation-of-petition is an oral genre which subsequently becomes part of the written public record via Hansard—the instances are public documents recorded by Hansard in the *Debates* and published on the Parliament of Canada website, searchable by anyone, including petitioners and potential petitioners following the uptake of petitions.

This genre is important because it is the first *public* uptake of the petition as well as the first time the petition brings its issue to its addressee; this is the genre that was subdued during the “gag rule” which immediately tabled all anti-slavery petitions without allowing them to be read or discussed in the US Congress (Zaeske, 2003). Through the presentation-of-petition, the petition enters the genre system as an official document requiring a response. In terms of the exigencies of the petition, the presentation of citizen voices to its addressees in this public way is critical to the genre’s function of fostering citizen subjectivity: the public voicing of citizen concerns, marked in the public record, provides assurance (at least on the surface) that the addressee has heard citizens’ voices and heard their request. In addition, the public presentation of the petition’s issue is critical to the exigency identified earlier of responding to a current situation or impending bill.

Evidence from petitioners themselves suggests a reciprocal relationship between the petition and the presentation-of-petition. The blog *Digital Copyright Canada*, reporting on a recent paper petition campaign protesting proposed changes to Canadian copyright law, offers evidence that at least some petitioners are indeed familiar with the presentation-of-petition genre and, moreover, that they manipulate it in order to bolster the activism related to their petition. One post on *Digital Copyright Canada* reports that a petition with 87 signatures was tabled by MP Art Hanger on Feb. 21, 2007. The blog post not only gives a link to the text of the presentation in Hansard but also pastes the text into the blog entry; on another page, petition authors inform potential volunteers that they “want to ensure that [they] link to any MPs that table signatures, including quoting from the Hansard” (McOrmond, July 3, 2008), which suggests that the petitioners know to use

the genre to benefit both themselves and the MP who helped them (by giving him something of value—publicity). Perhaps the most telling evidence of petitioners' awareness of this other genre in the genre system is a post making the savvy observation that another MP presenting a petition was able to bend the rules constraining the presentation-of-petition genre (members are not allowed to read the text of the petition) in order to benefit the cause. The writer notes of MP Charlie Angus that "*He managed to read nearly the entire text of the petition into Hansard*, and I believe that by doing so will alert other MPs to these critical property rights issues!" (emphasis mine), and goes on to provide the link to and the transcript of this event. (McOrmond, Mar. 28, 2007).<sup>48</sup>

#### *Presentation-of-Petition Corpus Features*

Knowing what features of the petition are useful to MPs as they meet their own needs within the genre system, we can better analyze the choices made by those who author and sign Canadian electronic petitions addressed to the Canadian federal government. Understanding these features, we can have a better sense of which changes to petitions might be most important—for example, which changes might keep electronic petitions from meeting the needs of others in the system, that is, might diverge in significant ways from local expectations.

Formal requirements state that MPs may read the title of the petition and provide a summary; they may also mention how many people have signed the petition and where they come from. They are not permitted to read the petition text aloud, or to engage in any debate about the petition, as stipulated by Standing Order 36.(7) and enforced by the

---

<sup>48</sup> The enthusiastic blogger above's exclamation mark is warranted: at 344 words, this presentation-of-petition is well above the average length of texts in the corpus (101 words), and longer than any instances in the corpus by almost 100 words.

Speaker.<sup>49</sup> What features does the resulting genre have that allow it to serve MPs needs in the face of these restrictions? To examine this, I assembled a corpus of presentation-of-petitions, collecting the last one hundred presentations presented in the House before June 1, 2008. One hundred was decided on for ease of statistical counting and because it is a sufficient number both to reveal patterns and to yield insightful deviations from those patterns. Recent presentations were chosen to coincide with the recent and active electronic petitions examined. The petitions were examined primarily for the frequency with which numbers, locations, and types of signatories were mentioned; the most common diction used to describe the signatories; and the frequency with which presenters referred to other petitions on the topic. These were chosen a) because they appeared common elements of the genre and b) because of their relation to developments noted in electronic petitions.

*Signature numbers.* Analysis of the corpus reveals that presentations are short: the average length of presentation was only 101 words, and no presentation went longer than 250 words. This means that every word or phrase needs to lend itself to the multiple functions of the presentation. Yet, contrary to expectations, the first finding is that presentations-of-petitions do not emphasize the numbers of signatories as much as they do other elements of the petitions. Numbers of signatories are only mentioned in 51 of 100 presentations. Of those, many mentions are vague (“a number,” “a large number,” “many,” “hundreds,” and “thousands”); even when numbers are mentioned specifically, numbers are often approximate (“almost 1000,” “just over 200,” etc.). Some presenters

---

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, the reminder of Acting Speaker Mr. Andrew Scheer in an excerpt encountered in the presentation-of-petition corpus: “Order, please. I would remind members that they are supposed to provide a brief summary, not read all the wording in the petition when presenting petitions” (Debates, May 29, 2008).

do emphasize the numbers of signatories (“almost 1000,” for instance, suggests the presenter rounds up to make his numbers have maximum impact). Large numbers of signatories is a salient factor in establishing the importance of a petition—yet it is clearly not the most salient factor, since half of presenters do not mention it.<sup>50</sup>

Single large petitions may in fact suit one exigence of the *petition* but not accommodate important functions of the presentation-of-petition genre. Emphasizing the numbers of petitions rather than the numbers of petitioners suggests that multiple small petitions are more useful to MPs. MPs frequently present small petitions and draw attention to the number of people also presenting petitions on the same topic and/or the past (and sometimes future) presentation of petitions on the same topic. An example from May 6, 2008 shows this strategy in action.

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): 

Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present many names on *petitions* in support of Bill C-484, the unborn victims of crime act. *These petitions keep pouring in* from all areas of the country. *In this particular instance*, I have over 2,500 names on the *petitions* I am presenting *today*.

These people are asking that Parliament pass Bill C-484. They mention specifically my name as the sponsor of the bill and are asking us to recognize in law the life of the child that the woman wants to give birth to, give life to and give love to.[98] (Hansard, May 6, 2008)

---

<sup>50</sup> It could be that petitions where the number of signatories is not mentioned only have the minimum number of signatories (25), in which case we might understand why MPs would not want to draw attention to the fact that they are presenting a petition with the minimum number. Yet many also pass up the chance to emphasize numbers (for example, presenting petitions with 71 signatories rather than the rounded-up “almost 100”), suggesting that the genre does not require the emphasis on numbers.

Epp emphasizes the numbers of signatories (“many names,” “over 2500 names”); more vigorously, he emphasizes the enduring nature of citizen interest in the issue by pointing to the repetition of citizens’ petitions over time: he mentions “petitions” in the plural three times and emphasizes repetition with “keep pouring in,” “this,” “particular instance,” and “today.” Counting individual words and phrases such as “yet another,” “again,” “today,” “this time,” “keep pouring in,” “too,” “more,” etc. as separate instances, thirty-five verbal markers appeared in the corpus referring to the presentation of other petitions on the same topic as the one being presented that day; petitioning, with these wordings, appears a ground of spontaneous citizen response to deeply felt concerns. While this is not a high percentage, many of the instances where this tactic was employed, such as the one quoted above, used multiple markers to underline the repetition. The multiple presentation of petitions on the same topic serves at least two needs: it gives the MP more occasions to address the House (thereby performing representativeness and building a public profile); and it hammers home the importance of the issue (“so many Canadians feel this way that we have yet another petition”). That is, the repetition of the presentation and the verbal gestures to the need for repetition appear useful to MPs as they argue for or against bills, perform representativeness, and so on.<sup>51</sup>

*Emphasis on signatory location and identity.* If numbers are not consistently emphasized in the genre, what features of the petitions serve the needs of this uptake text? Answering this question, we can observe how Canadian e-petitioners’ choices

---

<sup>51</sup> What is more, since different MPs can present petitions on the same or similar topics, thereby allowing repetition of the request, it is sometimes more strategic to present petitions that way. Since 1986, individual MPs presenting multiple petitions on one topic on one day must present them all at the same time, indicating that there are three petitions on the topic, rather than reading the request several times. Before 1986, however, MPs presented multiple small petitions on the same day to great effect. As noted earlier, for instance, on one occasion in 1983 (before the time for presenting petitions was limited to fifteen minutes per day), MPs presented hundreds of petitions on the same topic—the Crowsnest Pass rates—effectively bombarding the House with petitions.

(discussed in the next section) to include or change such features demonstrates adherence to or divergence from local practices. Having a way to assess this in turn provides insight into how technologically-afforded changes do or do not inform genre evolution. I have already hinted above that location and position of signatories is more important to MPs—and hence has implications for how changes to petitioning might weaken the reciprocal relationship between these two genres. Fully eighty-one presentations in the corpus mention where the petitioners live (Quebec, Vancouver, “my riding,” etc.) and/or the petitioners’ status in society (students, workers, constituents, etc.). In addition, some presentations mention specific individual signatories. Petitions must have mostly Canadian signatures to be approved by the Clerk for presentation, so all petitions that make it to the presentation period can be assumed to be signed by Canadian citizens and, presumably, constituents (unless not of voting age). In spite of this, identifying signatories as “Canadians” (14 petitions); “citizens” (5); constituents/members of community or riding (26); people living in a particular city, province, riding, or region (59); and people belonging to a profession or organization (10), is a common genre feature. Such identifications also support MPs in their performances of representativeness by focusing on the petitioners’ status as citizens/Canadians/constituents; providing petitioners’ status and/or location supports MPs as they make cases for the legitimacy of petitioners’ requests.

The reciprocal relationships which form between genres in a system foster the continued vigour of each genre. However, what happens when new ways of doing things encourage innovation and change in one of these genres? What happens when these new ways come about because of the kinds of influences I have identified earlier: perceived

affordances offered by technology, and circulated by that technology beyond the local contexts in which change is usually understood and considered?

*Intertextuality: Implications for E-Petitioners*

For Canadian e-petitioners, four issues emerge from my examination of House of Commons meta-genre and the presentation-of-petition. I outline these issues here before turning to a corpus of Canadian petitions in order to see the choices that petitioners make regarding these issues. Knowing what issues are important to the relationship between such genres, examining rhetors' choices regarding those issues can demonstrate how genres change, how change may be resisted, and the relative power of technological affordances and local knowledge in these processes.

*Bigger is better.* The ease with which the “digital clipboard” can collect digital signatures leads to local difference and potential conflict regarding how many signatures are desirable—and therefore has implications for how selective petition authors will be in soliciting or accepting signatures. The “digital clipboard,” circulating widely, cheaply, and easily, makes collecting large numbers of signatures easier and more likely—and perhaps more expected. Moreover, other perceived affordances allow sites to calculate and display running totals of the number of signatures collected, putting further emphasis on the numbers of signatories. At PetitionOnline, the most “active” petitions are listed on the front page of the site, while at GoPetition, “Active Petitions” is one of three categories of petitions highlighted on the front page. “Active” denotes petitions with many signatures, drawing attention toward numbers of signatories rather than to other measures of a petition's success such as signatures by important people or signatures by a relevant population. Perceived affordances also permit the running display of the

numbers of signatures collected—something more difficult with a paper petition campaign. At PetitionOnline, the running total is displayed when one clicks “View Current Signatures”; at GoPetition, this information is even more up front, appearing on the petition page itself. Thus visitors to a petition page (petition authors, potential signatories, media representatives, interested government researchers) can see both the number of signatures received, and, often, the number of signatures that has been set as a goal (along with, sometimes, a date for accomplishing that goal). These affordances, that is, allow close monitoring of whether the petition has met its goal—hence providing incentives to sign or warnings that more people need to be directed to sign.

At one level, the petition’s accepted social action of expressing the voices of the people is hospitable to these perceived affordances, these new ways of doing things: the digital clipboard allows more voices to be heard. As well, the convention of signature number display, coupled with an emphasis on large numbers of signatures, also lends itself to the democratic function of the petition in a new way because it appears useful to the media. As PetitionOnline’s FAQ reminds its users, providing media with the URL of the petition allows media to monitor the growth of the petition—and with media attention comes a greater assurance that voices will be heard and that addressees will be held accountable. While media has been able to follow campaigns in the past, it is easier to track activity at a URL than at physical locations across a city or nation; what is more, electronic petitions in progress, especially large ones, can be newsworthy items—as novelties or phenomena—in ways that paper petitions perhaps would not be. In light of the observations made earlier about the usefulness to MPs of repeating the presentation-of-petition (rather than having one single presentation of a large petition), however,

promoting the collection of ever-greater numbers of signatures appears somewhat incommensurate with the needs of others in the genre system.

*Foreign signatories.* In addition, electronic petitions' emphasis on numbers also sometimes coincides with large numbers of foreign signatories, further challenging the local image of the Canadian House of Commons petition, its ability to officially enter the genre system, and its usefulness to MPs. E-petitioning often fosters not only local but also global citizenship: civic-minded surfers, feeling an opportunity and duty to support causes beyond the local (to protest the Canadian seal hunt, for example), write themselves into the subject position of global citizen in the act of signing. The foreign signatories permitted by the Scottish Parliament petition site and by free petition sites fulfill this duty in response to diverse issues—environmental, cultural, political, and more. As the formal House rules and the presentation-of-petition both show, however, the presence of foreign signatories on a petition may significantly undermine its effectiveness vis-à-vis the local genre system.

*Identifying signatory location.* Another issue for these genres that arises out of new perceived affordances (and adaptations to those new technologically-enabled possibilities) is that an email address itself may come to serve as a sufficient indicator of one's *location*. This is because digital signatures are accepted as original when the signatory's email is proved to be a valid email belonging to the signatory. Traditionally, giving one's street address, city, or province provided some measure of authenticity, however weak. In theory, the proper name and the location could be matched, the handwritten signature serving as the promise that the link was valid. This "promise" itself is a convention that has arisen in response to the technology of writing (we might

remember that in some other localities and times, different technologies have also been seen as affording “signatures”—in some cultures, one has been able to “sign” documents using a stamp with one’s name engraved, rather than by writing one’s name by hand.)

With the emergence of new conventions for verifying a signature’s originality, the expectation that signatories need to provide their geophysical or geopolitical location may diminish. Evidence of this equation between email address and location—and of its consequences—comes from the current Clerk of Petitions, who reports:

Petitions with a mix of e-mail addresses and street addresses have been received occasionally. In such cases signatures accompanied only by e-mail addresses are ignored as part of the count. We have received paper petitions with e-mail addresses only. Unfortunately these are rejected and returned to the Member uncertified. (personal communication, Moore, July 21, 2008)

As we have seen earlier in the chapter, such a development would pose two challenges to a petition’s success: petitions without addresses fail to meet the meta-generic requirements administered by the Clerk of Petitions; they also fail to support the presentation-of-petition, which frequently draws on signatory location.

Given the tension between a) this new equation between location and email and b) its failure to meet requirements monitoring official entry into the genre system, will Canadian petition authors require only signatories’ email addresses (as is the case with the Scottish Parliament e-petitioning service)? Like the issue of foreign signatories, this latter issue presents an opportunity for both petition authors and petition signatories to draw on their local genre knowledge, to adapt to perceived affordances in order to protect the genre’s relationship with the local genre system.

*Soliciting and giving comments.* Finally, a fourth area of affordance and adaptation important to electronic petitioning in the Canadian context is that electronic petition sites offer petitioners the chance to elicit new categories of information from signatories. Perhaps most significantly given the social actions of the petition discussed earlier, one may design a petition signature form to invite comments from signatories. Comments represent an adaptation with notable popularity and one which appears—at least to some—to make up for the perception that electronic petitions cannot provide authentic and locatable signatories in the same ways as a paper petition. Yet comments make Canadian petitions to the House of Commons uncertifiable. The current Clerk of Petitions, when asked if petitioners ever include comments, reports that it has been rare for petitions to include spaces for comments, but that “[i]ndividual comments appear occasionally by a signature”; such petitions “are usually rejected as the Standing Orders do not allow interlineations which we interpret as including comments” (Moore, personal communication, July 21, 2008).

If comments subject a petition to rejection, why do they seem natural to some users and what functions might they serve? Comments fulfill functions of the petition in ways that occur differently in paper petitions. In the act of commenting, one can experience civic action and identity more actively than by just signing; one can not only signal agreement, but express beliefs and attempt to persuade. Internet users have learned in other kinds of CMD—discussion groups, the comments sections of newspaper articles and political blogs, Facebook groups, Twitter, and others—that comments are a viable way of performing a range of social actions. They also become familiar with comment types that have emerged (banter, expressions of solidarity, repetition of statements, and

others) to serve a variety of needs; many of these foster community-building (one of the social actions of the Canadian House of Commons petition—though not traditionally foregrounded by House of Commons meta-genre. Given these precedents learned in other kinds of CMD which draw on an affordance in similar ways, and their apparent commensurability with the social actions of the genre, we can observe that the requirements of the genre system may conflict strongly with the evolutionary trajectory of genres like the e-petition.

Moore's further observations about following official rules about interlineations, in fact, suggests that the more personal and extended expressions of opinion and identity that comments allow are, in fact, dispreferred from the perspective of some others in the genre system. "If there are only one or two [comments] *and they are not offensive or do not try to influence other signatories,*" Moore writes, "we overlook them" (personal communication, July 21, 2008; emphasis mine). The requirement that comments be inoffensive is perhaps not very surprising, though we might pause to remember Smith's observations about the origins of the decorous language rule. However, the requirement that signatories "do not try to influence other signatories" is surprising. The implication of this requirement is that the petition does not accommodate the solicitation and expression of shared feeling or opinion in the ways we might expect of a civic genre; the petition, in this image of the genre, remains fundamentally a request (a "petition," truly) and a message from petitioners to addressees rather than more social and open-ended communication (the petition does not do the same things as a town hall, a public meeting, an advisory committee, a public demonstration, and so on.) The community-building function must give way to allow for the genre to enter the genre system in which it may

perform its other social actions. As I show below in my discussion of Canadian petitioners' comments, comments attempting to influence other signatories, or to otherwise make connections with them, are a common feature of electronic petitions.

*Authorial and Signatory Choices in Canadian E-Petitions*

I began this chapter by identifying the ways that new ways of doing things—facilitated and spread by CMD—circulate beyond the local contexts in which genres emerge and evolve. I have shown also that these new ways of doing things may challenge and be challenged by local expectations about the petition's role in an existing genre system. This includes expectations about the rules that must be followed by parties as documents and actions become "official." It also includes reciprocal relationships that arise as features of one genre (features of the petition as laid out by official rules) become useful to others. Having identified areas of adaptation with implications for the relationship between the federally-addressed petition in Canada and the local genre system, what remains is to observe how Canadian petitioners respond to the possibilities offered by electronic petitioning.

*Methods.* To examine Canadian petitioning practices in relation to these four issues arising from the tension between a) local genre knowledge and b) competing conventions emerging from other localities, a small corpus of petitions from two free electronic petition sites popular with Canadians—PetitionOnline and GoPetition—was assembled.<sup>52</sup> The smaller size of the corpus (28 petitions) allowed for a combination of

---

<sup>52</sup> Both GoPetition and PetitionOnline provide search boxes that enable visitors to search the website specifically for key words or phrases to help them find petitions; these search boxes were used to find relevant petitions on each site. Petitions qualified for inclusion if they addressed the Government of Canada, the Parliament of Canada, or the Prime Minister of Canada, as these, ostensibly, like those delivered to the House of Commons, address elected Canadian government members at the federal level. Only petitions with twenty-five or more signatures were included, in order to a) be consistent with House

macro and micro analysis. Prior to corpus selection, several free petition sites—ePetitions, Care2Petition, Ipetition.net, GoPetition, and PetitionOnline—were examined to observe common characteristics in layout, meta-genre, and options for site users; petitions on each of the sites were also examined to provide a foundation for analysis of petitions in the corpus—to observe the variety and scope of petition features in these environments.

Two central questions were asked of the corpus in relation to the four issues described in the previous section. In what ways would citizen uses of e-petition software be commensurate or incommensurate with the expectations of government policies and the needs of MPs? And in what ways would they be commensurate with the social actions identified earlier? To answer these, both authorial and signatory choices were examined in each petition in light of the site instructions and the technical requirements and limits of the sites. Authorial choices in the petition text and instructions provided to signatories were analyzed to see how often arrangements were made for local (and locally identifiable) signatories. Signatory choices were analyzed to see what kinds of optional information (including comments) people provided, and to observe when people tried to circumvent the limits placed on them by petition authors or the technological

---

of Commons requirements (twenty-five is the minimum number of signatures required for a petition to the House of Commons to be approved) and b) to include only petitions that achieved some measure of “success” in terms of meeting those requirements. Petitions that meet this requirement also display proof of “uptake” by signatories, demonstrating that signatories recognized and ratified the petition as an instance of the genre. Several pages linked to the petition were included in the corpus.

1. The petition text, including preamble and prayer.
2. Instructions to signatories. This is the page reached when a visitor clicks the “Sign petition” link. It consists of a reiteration of the prayer, form fields for data, and instructions regarding the form fields indicating whether the information is required or optional.
3. Signature pages. Six pages of signatures, or less if a smaller petition, were recorded for each petition. If the petition included more than six pages of signatures, the first three and last three pages were captured; this was done to allow for shifts in signature patterns from the start of a petition to later in its life span.

constraints of the website. Patterns that emerged at GoPetition were checked against those that emerged at PetitionOnline; deeper analysis of individual petitions provided opportunities to consider the implications of larger patterns.

*Making arrangements for signatories.* Significantly for local petition authors and signatories of electronic petitions, the solicitation and giving of the signature is a moment where subjects have some room to exercise their genre knowledge—to draw on their knowledge of what features petitions ought (or ought not) to have. Encountering perceived affordances and the conventions of the petition site—new ways of giving, asking for, and arranging information—they can choose to keep their petitions commensurate with local images of the genre, or to diverge from what they know that local petitions “look like.” I examined two areas of potential challenge: how provisions were made for foreign signatories and how authors and signatories managed requests for address or location.

When a petition author creates a new petition, he or she is asked to fill in several forms detailing the nature of the petition, the kinds of information required of signatories, and the levels of privacy or communication permitted. In effect, the author is asked to write two main pages: one containing a description of the cause and the “petition” (what is called the “prayer” in House of Commons meta-genre) itself, and one detailing the form that signatories will be asked to complete (the online version of the signature page in a paper petition). A third page will be generated automatically when the petition is active: a list showing the signatures and their numbers. On the first page, showing the cause and request, authors have multiple opportunities to specify who the target is and who should sign. GoPetition requires authors to specify “Target” and “Region”; while

“Target” is most often interpreted to mean the person/body to whom the petition will be delivered, some authors use “Target” to specify the group of people being asked to sign. Such varying uses are occasions of change—where choices about petition features may inform how petitions work and what social needs they most address.

On the second page (the signature page) authors have more opportunities to bring the petition in line with what they know of local signature requirements. Here they may rely on the knowledge of petitioning they have accumulated as citizens of a place—confident that they know how to proceed (and perhaps assured by the formal similarities between paper petitions and those on free petition sites). Or they may consult a variety of local meta-genre—news reports like the *Vancouver Sun* petition to the NFL, the CanLaw online guide, or official House of Commons procedural instructions. Consulting these sources of local knowledge—meta-genre or their own intuition and experience—authors may choose to include a variety of fields in the signature form and to specify which ones are required.

Some petition sites, like GoPetition, offer a preset list of fields; GoPetition lists title, name, street address, city/town, state/county/province, postal/zip code, and/or country/region, allowing authors to specify whether the fields are “optional,” “required,” or “not collected.” Others, like PetitionOnline, provide basic fields (name and email address) that must be completed, and allow authors to create their own fields: PetitionOnline gives authors up to four fields, offering suggestions such as “Address; Zip Code,” “Political Party,” and “Comments.” In creating petitions, then, petition authors have multiple ways to specify who is eligible to sign and to make sure that signatures are commensurate with their image of a successful petition to the Canadian government.

Petition authors, however, are not the only authors of the document, and therefore not the only ones whose choices may be motivated by local genre knowledge: petition signatories, likewise, have choices in how they respond to the prompts in the signature field. Particularly (but not exclusively) with regard to “optional” fields in the signature form, petition signatories may act in ways they deem appropriate to the genre as they arrange for uptake.

*Foreign signatories.* Given the ease of searching for and signing petitions, the push to bolster numbers of signatures, and differing local expectations of who may sign a petition to a government, foreign signatories are a distinct possibility on e-petitions. Therefore, do the petition text and/or the instructions of each petition make any provisions for foreign signatories (that is, did they give any indication that only Canadians should sign the petition?) Results show that half the petitions in the corpus do make requests or give indications—some weak, some strong—regarding whom is invited to sign. Requests appear in several locations on the first (petition) page: at GoPetition, in the petition title (“Canadians Stop!”), the petition “Target:” field, the “Region:” field, the prayer, and the petition text itself (via references to “we” and “our”). At PetitionOnline, requests come both on the first (petition) page, in the form of references to Canadian signatories in the text, and the second (signature form) page that potential signatories reach when they click “Sign petition.” The signature page at PetitionOnline comes with an optional instruction that authors can choose to include; the instruction, which appears at the top of the signature page, reads: “Eligible signatories” followed by the group entered by the author. In most of these cases, indications specify that Canadian citizens or

residents should sign, but in others the petition is identified as global or as open to international signatures; one petition goes so far as to say “every signature counts.”

These results suggest that petition authors do demonstrate awareness of local expectations regarding Canadian signatures. As authors, they make some effort to create documents in line with this image—efforts that in a paper petition might occur in face-to-face interactions with signatories, or which might be unnecessary if signatures are being collected at Canadian tables in Canadian malls. However, these efforts are sometimes very slight. Significantly, nor does the 50% rate demonstrate widespread genre choices in favour of the local image. In addition, some authors in the corpus, as I have noted, consciously encourage non-local (that is, international) signatures. At the start of this chapter, I suggested that local genre knowledge was encountering new ways of doing the “same” things in ways that it had encountered before—exposed to affordances and adaptations to these affordance, and to other local images of petitioning, without the same social interactions and sharing of experience that (genre theory has shown), usually monitors and guides genre change. These developments regarding foreign signatories show that at the same time as the surge in petitioning may emerge from the local context—the Canadian culture of petitioning and Canadian shared experience of problems that can be addressed by petitioning—changes to the genre are not rooted in that local context in the same way. Local genre awareness may be considered present, but either the awareness or the commitment to it (or both) is weak in the face of other emerging conventions.

*Location.* Choices regarding signatory location also demonstrate both local genre knowledge and changing practices incommensurate with the local genre system. I

inquired of the corpus whether authors a) made available/required email addresses, b) required markers of geophysical/geopolitical location, and c) provided options if signatories wanted to provide geophysical/geopolitical location. I also asked how signatories would respond to prompts for optional information.

Perhaps surprisingly, at GoPetition, all of the authors made the email field available, but only two (14.2%) of the petitions required signatories to give their email addresses. 64.29% of petitions did require some form of geophysical location. Of the two petitions requiring an email address, one belongs to the 35.71% that made all location fields optional; we might speculate that the email address sufficiently located the author/verified the signature. The other petitions making all location fields optional allowed people to sign with no address of any kind. Counting an email address as some kind of locating information, only 28.57% of petitions at GoPetition made optional but *did not require* any location identification of any kind. The high percentage of petitions requiring this information suggests that petition authors feel that listing signatory location is an important part of the genre, and that requesting geophysical/geopolitical location is preferred.

PetitionOnline results varied because all signatories at PetitionOnline are required to provide an email address (to which a verification email is sent). Strikingly, the number of petitions requiring geophysical location is almost reverse that of GoPetition: only 28.58 petitions *do require* such information, and only half the petitions provided any way for signatories to list location of some kind. At GoPetition, as I have shown, location information often appears important to authors and signatories. In light of this, the trend at PetitionOnline to avoid asking for information that would identify signatories as

residents or citizens of a place does not, after all, suggest that signatory location is unimportant. Rather, it suggests that for petitions where email addresses are required, the email address may appear sufficient to fulfill the requirements of the genre. This is in line with the petitions in the GoPetition group that require an email address but no other location.<sup>53</sup> The requirement for *geophysical* location—an old and enduring feature of the petition, and one important at several points in the local genre system in which these Canadian federally-addressed petitions seek uptake—at PetitionOnline seems to give way to constraints and meta-genre local to the petition site itself (an online locality with a force of its own.)

Signatories, in turn, are called on to exercise their genre knowledge as they respond to perceived affordances—the new ways that people perceive we can do things because of technology—and the conventions that have grown up around them. In two of the PetitionOnline petitions for which no provision for providing location was given (no signature fields allowing people to list their address), the signature pages collected for the corpus reveal signatories who use the comments field to list their location (their city and province). In other petitions where location information was optional, many people in fact provided some or all of the location information made optional (even going so far as to give street addresses when not required to).

This suggests that the locatability of the signatory in geophysical/geopolitical terms is an unstable and contested area where local genre knowledge pushes against conventions and constraints emerging from online practices. Canadian petitioners' adaptations to perceived affordances (the new ways of doing things that technology

---

<sup>53</sup> Alternatively, PetitionOnline authors may be informed by PetitionOnline's cautionary note to users to be wary of demanding information; an instruction page tells authors "Keep in mind that the more information you require, the fewer people are likely to sign the petition."

seems to allow) in electronic petitions demonstrate local genre knowledge regarding location as an important feature of signature authenticity and the genre's future in the genre system. However, petitioners' method of making the petition commensurate with the need to "locate" and verify signatories is moving away from allegiance to practices accepted in the local context of the House of Commons petition and moving toward practices local to free online petition sites.

*Prompting comments in e-petitions.* On all free sites studied for this chapter, petition authors may invite comments. These provisions for comments suggest that comments are seen as an important part of the "grassroots democracy" ostensibly being fostered. GoPetition implies that public comments are necessary when it counsels potential commenters against hiding their comments: "You may elect to hide your comment from public view. If you do so, then only the author and petitionee will see your comment. Hiding your comment is not recommended." Care2Petition in fact requires comments and argues that this is in order to control how the genre is taken up by governments—effectively, how e-petitions are able to enter their local genre systems:

The reason we require comments is because many of these petitions are being put together for public comment periods for the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Land Management, or other governmental offices. With many Internet-based petitions that don't require comments, your name and information would simply be plugged into an identical copy of a form letter. Many of the Government organizations have thus decided that all such identical letters — sometimes from thousands of individuals! — will count as just one public comment, making the thousands of signatures invalid.

If the petition enters the system as a form letter, it is dismissed; if it enters as a petition, the site implies, its power will be greater.

In contrast, government sites, in line with traditional expectations of the petition as providing only signatory names and addresses, do not provide fields for comments. However, some government sites do draw on perceived affordances to promote public sphere discourse by providing discussion forums attached to the petitions. #10 Downing St. does not do this, but the Scottish Parliament service and the Bundestag service (created by the same group) do provide them. In keeping with the prescription against “interlineations” in the text (Standing Order 36.2 (d)), the proposal put forth by the Modernization Committee in their oral report to the Standing House Committee did not include any provision for either comments or discussion. Here we see different beliefs about the petition and their relationship to genre features. As I have shown, in the Canadian context, rules for both petitioners and MPs tell participants that a petition is a request, not an occasion for debate; the developments elsewhere actively promote debate as a value that the petition can further by through the new comments feature.

Given these competing views of comments’ value and suitability in petitioning, site visitors are faced with several choices about how to adapt to the free petition software’s provisions for and suggestions regarding comments. For instance, petition authors may choose not to allow comments in order to keep the petition consistent with genre knowledge local to the geopolitical (in this case, Canadian) context; signatories themselves may choose not to comment when invited, or even not to sign a comments-enabled petition, rejecting the comments feature as incommensurate with their local genre

knowledge. Examining petitions in the corpus, I inquired into these authorial and signatory choices.

Results suggest that comments are an important feature of Canadian e-petitions, demonstrating awareness of local genre knowledge even as they take petitions further away from being certifiable and therefore able to take their conventional place in the local genre system. Of the twenty-eight petitions in the corpus, only five (17.85%) did not enable the comments field in the signature box. The high rate of comments-enabled petitions is surprising given that comments are not a feature of petitions delivered to the House offline—in one sense, inviting signatories to make comments demonstrates an ignorance of or disregard for local genre knowledge. However, the enabling of the comments function may be considered in another way a legitimate reproduction of local genre knowledge: comments are fitting to the petition's social actions in allowing more direct communication with one's government (because one may directly address the target rather than merely give one's name) and increased access to the subject position of citizen—because one participates in the genre more fully now than by merely signing.

At the same time, however, the ease with which this new feature appears in e-petitioning also demonstrates how discourse conventions from one locality may inform those from another. Comments boxes and user comments are regular features of many online genres and platforms, that is, features local to internet culture: blogs, online newspapers, Facebook pages and so on all invite and value comments. Commenting on a newspaper article or blog, one can address authors and other readers and expect to get a response; moreover, in many cases, by commenting a user is in fact fulfilling a responsibility to signal appreciation, to speak out on an issue, or to build relationships.

Thus in many localities online where commenting occurs, local knowledge favours commenting. Comments boxes are common not only to internet culture more broadly, but also to petition sites more narrowly. Activist-minded individuals browsing other online petitions will see how often comments are invited and supplied; interested visitors to a particular petition, clicking on the “View Signatures” link, will see if other petitioners have commented; even a one-time visitor to a petition, not pausing to look around and simply clicking on the link to sign, will encounter the comments box in the signature form (if it has been enabled by the author). Thus even relatively new internet users, perhaps pulled to an online petition only by their commitment to the petition’s issue, will encounter local conventions different from those of petitions they encounter in offline settings. The frequency with which authors choose to enable the comments function, fostering a genre feature new to the federally-addressed Canadian petition (and making it uncertifiable) but familiar (and serving important functions) in online discourse suggests that there is indeed tension between local knowledges at work in online genres.

Signatories’ choices in turn support this conclusion. Signatories, like petition authors, did in fact take advantage of the perceived affordance of comments boxes. On average, thirty-five percent of signatories left comments on comments-enabled petitions, a figure which represents a significant departure from the “occasional” signature described by the Clerk of Petitions. The rate of commenting varied from petition to petition, ranging from 10.5 % on a petition about Canada’s responsibility to address the global food crisis to rates between 40% and 50% for petitions complaining about airport noise in Calgary, calling for Robert Latimer (a man convicted of the “mercy killing” of his disabled daughter) to get day parole, and other topics. The variable rate suggests that

the new genre feature is flexible, able to serve different needs within the larger social actions recognized as motivating the federally-addressed petition. When signatories fill in the optional comments field rather than rejecting comments as inappropriate to the federally-addressed Canadian petition, discourse conventions from elsewhere push local knowledge of petitioning to evolve.

At the same time, the *types* of comments in the corpus suggest that the convention of commenting is taken up in ways that may be seen as commensurate with the needs of other participants in the local genre system. This new feature, therefore, may continue to gain strength. One type of comment of particular interest which emerged is the “identification of signatory” comment, which offers identifying information about the signatory in relation to the cause being protested. In addition to the comments used by signatories to list their location when no other venue was offered to do so, petitioners also make comments identifying their profession or experiences (as victims, family members of those identified in the petition, etc.) as relevant to the petition request. A petition protesting Canadian auto policies regarding foreign imports, for example, contains comments identifying signatories as former Ford workers now laid off, wives of auto workers, and so on; another, protesting the ways that violence against a group of women has been dealt with, contains comments identifying signatories as sisters, daughters, friends and mothers of those women. This comment type, appearing across petition topics, shows a sense of the importance of locating citizens; being able to locate signatories, as I showed earlier, fills needs experienced by MPs in their dealings with petitions. Moreover, it locates them in terms seen as most useful to the cause—

underlining the usefulness of this new feature even if signatories are no longer located primarily in the geopolitical or geophysical terms of a paper petition.

One uptake of the identification-of-signatory comment type also shows that the emerging convention may also allow e-petitions to enter the genre system in unanticipated ways. One possibility is that if new genre features are emerging which in fact address existing local needs, those features may offer rhetors a new way to enter an existing genre system. To turn to one final example of uptake, one MP's recent (2007) use of the comments in a petition about the need to reform the Youth Criminal Justice Act demonstrates this possibility. MP Harold Albrecht brings up an e-petition during the discussion of a bill rather than attempting to table the petition. He ends his presentation on the bill by quoting at length from the petition—significantly, quoting comments rather than the petition description or prayer. Four out of the six comments he quotes are “identification of signatory” comments; he introduces his comments by drawing attention to the types of people he will quote from: “I would like to quote from just a few of the comments from the thousands received, comments from *youth workers, from law and criminal justice majors, and from teens just like Dustin.*” The four comments are abbreviated below:

1.) The first comment reads:

I am fourteen myself...

2.) A parent wrote:

My son is currently a victim of a young offender...

3.) Another comment reads:

As a teen I see too many violent offenses like this...

4.) The final comment I would like to share this morning is this one:

I am a Criminal Justice major at Nipissing University in North Bay. I have also graduated from the Correctional Worker Program at Canadore College. I have studied the YCJA at great lengths...As a parent of four kids... (Hansard, Nov. 22, 2007)

Albrecht sums up his lengthy quotations by reminding us of the self-identifications performed in the petitions comments: “From these comments, it can be seen that ordinary Canadians are speaking out. Youths themselves are speaking out. Victims are speaking out. These Canadians are asking us to wake up and take the necessary steps to correct a system that is failing them.”

Identifying the petitioners as “youth workers,” “law and criminal justice majors,” “teens,” “ordinary Canadians,” “youths,” “victims,” and “Canadians,” Albrecht suggests that the comments feature of the electronic petition serves his needs: it allows him to perform representativeness in a way similar to the information provided to MPs for their official presentation-of-petitions, but arguably with fewer constraints because outside of the official time for presentations he is not bound by strict rules about what parts of the petition he can present. Albrecht’s move suggests a new possibility: that the e-petition, forming different intertextual relationships in the genre system based on new features such as comments, may emerge as a new genre operating alongside the petition but without the petition’s status as a “longstanding right of citizenship.”

*Conclusions: Genre Evolution in Familiar Genres*

In this chapter I have demonstrated two forces at work in the evolution of petitioning/e-petitioning: the existence of a well-established and heavily-regulated local

genre system, complete with meta-genre and policies generated by government with the power to monitor and control entry into that system; and the circulation amongst diverse local contexts of new ways of doing things. Tension arises between these forces as a result of the public and global circulation of new technological features at a time when the genre appears to many a useful way to address problems. While my focus here has been on the affordance of digital text, new perceived affordances—such as voice recognition, wireless capabilities, tablet-style computers on which one writes with a stylus, and technologies not yet dreamt of—will continue to encourage people to do things in new ways and to share those new ways with others beyond the local. The observations I have made here are especially relevant for other genres like petitions: genres with old, well-established profiles and widely-felt exigencies, but still subject to local histories and values; genres with established genre systems buttressed by institutional meta-genre; and genres which promise to enhance self, sociality, and action (in this case, citizenship) in ways attractive to some and potentially threatening to others.

What are the implications for such genres of the tension I have observed between, on the one hand, subjects demonstrating and adhering to local genre knowledge and, on the other, subjects following local knowledge issuing from elsewhere that they encounter because of the CMD environment? Examining the choices of Canadian petition authors and signatories on free e-petition sites, I have observed that petitioners in fact take up perceived affordances in ways that often appear consistent with both features and social actions of offline petitions to the same addressees. They may also appear consistent in spirit with the petition features drawn on by other genres in the genre system. That is, I have observed that online petitioners continue to demonstrate and reproduce local genre

knowledge. I have also shown, however, particularly with regard to the introduction of a new feature, the petition comment, that new discourse practices viable online may “trump” the expectations of a genre that is tied to a geopolitical context. What is more, my analysis suggests that such features, though perhaps initially familiar and fitting from experience of other online genres or online culture more generally, may come to be an expected feature of the genre.

The findings in this chapter suggest that possibilities for enhancing democracy (or otherwise transforming existing socio-political structures) vary significantly between new genres like the homeless blog and familiar ones like the petition. Looking back to the email petition, where uptake denied the genre and pushed petitioning on the internet to more closely resemble face-to-face petitioning, we might foresee that new features such as the petition comment, too, in time will fall out of favour in online petitioning practices. The relative power of the genre system over uptakes of this kind of civic genre is significant, potentially encouraging petitioners to follow local requirements with regard to everything except the matter of digital signatures—as is in fact the case with a few petitions in the corpus. Moreover, if the Canadian government itself chooses to follow through with previous initiatives and to provide electronic petitioning services of its own in which comments are not an option, this new genre feature may fall away.

With genres like the homeless blog, the main point of negotiation is over local expectations of what we “know” about writing subjects (what we “know” about homelessness, homeless people, and the kinds of discourse a homeless person might draw on). There, genre evolution is negotiated in part via public face-work, out of which emerges a provisional consensus that allows (or prohibits) new kinds of discourse,

relationships, and ideas to flourish. In contrast, with genres like the e/petition, the possibilities for civic identity and action are more subject to established and locally-grounded relationships between rhetors and genres—requiring rhetors to balance the promise of innovation with the needs of other rhetors in a genre system. A final point can be made now about the need to think about “access” and “voice” more carefully. As I show in Chapter Four, as rhetors take up perceived affordances online, they meet with constraints on civic action quite different from those proposed by those traditionally concerned with “access” to the internet. Mele’s observations of the Jervay housing residents’ use of the internet to empower themselves in their housing struggle, for example, brings him to caution readers about missing infrastructure for marginalized groups, a “technological gap along lines of social and economic inequalities of class, race, gender (Harasim 1993: 33), and location” (1999, 307). Killoran’s warning about “orphaned” online genres (2006) in his study of online resumes that succeed and those that do not likewise suggests that gaining access to a “viable” genre system is a key factor in a genre’s success. The evolution of e-petitioning in the Canadian context shows that constraints may in fact *issue from* access in unexpected ways: from access to others’ ways of using technology; from a sense of entitlement to access that encourages the taking up of perceived affordances in ways that may be shut down by other more powerful agents invested in the genre; or from monitored “access” to genre innovation provided by such agents.

## Conclusion: Evolving Discourse Practices and the Local

Linguist David Crystal, reflecting on *Language on the Internet*, notes instances of language change that can be observed online, such as neologisms and new graphic conventions—part of what he sees as the emergence of a new if unstable language variety (2001, 92). Such studies of language change offer important data for critiquing the assumptions about CMD that underpin theories of online identity and community. At the same time, to understand how computer-mediated discourse informs possibilities for self and sociality, we need to understand people's social experience of CMD and "change." That is, we need to know what internet speakers and writers "know" about these new conditions for communication and their effects, and how such knowledge is produced.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I survey talk about how communication in online environments affects how we manage a) our sense of "self"; b) other people's sense of who we are (and can be); c) the relationships that we manage in everyday social encounters; and d) the larger social orders that these selves and relationships produce and are produced by. I critique the assumptions about language that underpin these bodies of talk. In doing so, I show that in order to evaluate possibilities for "change" and "newness," we need to examine audience design, face-work, and genre in CMD—"arenas of language use" (to borrow Herbert Clark's turn of phrase) (1992) in which people produce selves and social relations in concert with their listeners and readers. At the same time as I begin in Chapter One to critique assumptions about language in scholarly and lay discourse about online communication, I also suggest that such talk is an important and evolving way of managing change.

*Locality: Insights into Online and Offline Communication*

What propels—or redirects—change in such discourse practices? These studies have suggested the importance of understanding internet users’ awareness of and stance toward local contexts. One key insight that such discourse gives, I conclude in Chapter One, is that speakers, listeners, writers and readers hold positions in multiple localities; we need to ask, I have suggested, how these positions inform subjects’ responses to the “change” and “newness” that CMD presents.

Chapters Two through Four show that internet users must navigate knowledge of face-work, audience design, and genre issuing from localities defined by a range of parameters. In Chapter Two, I suggest that when designing utterances online, we work from expectations of others and their knowledge: expectations about “grounding criteria,” about interlocutor responsibilities for the “guarantee of relevance,” about others’ awareness of and attitudes toward “overhearers,” and about the technological consciousness informing what is “*mutually manifest*,” or “perceptible or inferable” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 39). In examining netiquette texts and news stories about Canadian internet use, I demonstrate that these expectations may be “local” to the imagined community of the nation, to a regional stereotype of gender or age, to a genre of online discourse, or to online localities defined by our own or other users’ metadiscourse. In the face of these multiple localities, I argue, authoring, reauthoring, circulating, and citing netiquette discourse gives users a new tool for asserting their “location” and recognizing where others locate themselves. Likewise, in Chapter Three, I show that texts like the homeless blog address publics from multiple localities about widely-felt social needs. Homeless bloggers may speak from narrowly bordered geophysical contexts, from

broader geopolitical contexts, from their sense that they write within the “blogosphere,” and from their “location” at their own blog URL. Their readers and respondents speak from similarly diverse positions.

This multiplicity of localities that internet users account for in writing/speaking and reading/listening online is important because, as I have demonstrated, we manage self and sociality through audience design, face-work, and genre. These three, I have shown, draw upon and reproduce local knowledge of discourse types and conventions, of social roles, and of situations and settings. Further, I have argued that face-work—which constructs and is at the same time constrained by local knowledge—informs the pragmatics of audience design and the dynamics of genre uptake. Face-work is local in two ways that have particular consequences for how we manage self, sociality, and change through genre and the pragmatics of audience design. First, as I have shown in my discussion of homeless blogs and electronic petitions and people’s responses to them, ideas about types of writing form our expectations of people’s “personal front,” the expressive equipment by which people assert and recognize social roles. While I come to this conclusion by observing the public metadiscourse about an online genre, the conclusion is equally valid for offline genres. Acknowledging how expectations of genre accompany ideas about local subjects, genre theorists can begin to reexamine how ideology and power are reproduced or disrupted in struggles over who can produce what kinds of writing.

Face-work is local in another way that is important in audience design and genre: it generates a localized *consensus* about speakers, their discourse, and the situation that also motivates action in individual encounters. In my study of the homeless blog, I

demonstrate that protecting face by protecting a localized, provisional consensus may motivate readers and writers as they respond to others. This observation helps explain readers' and writers' behaviour in the face of other online genres, like email petitions and blog comments, where uptake (or lack thereof) is public. Though this observation comes to light through study of an online genre, it can inform our understanding of any genre where consensus about the genre can be observed and where threats to consensus are publicly observable—and where such threats can therefore impact the “face” of those who have helped to build that consensus. This observation provides insight into a dynamic implied by Freadman's 2002 theory of uptake but never directly addressed by genre theory: we may *see* that a text or utterance is an instance of a genre but fail to “take it” as that. Genres, I suggest, are not only constellations of features that can be recognized as familiar ways of responding to widely recognized problems: they are also constellations we are *willing* to recognize in the context both of the problem to be solved and of the provisional consensus reached by those responding to such rhetorical language in front of each other.

These observations, in fact, apply both to CMD and to communication “offline” where it occurs in conditions of publicness and interactivity. Acknowledging how interlocutors and rhetors are motivated by face-work and by loyalty to local knowledge allows us to examine the choices they make—to reframe how they respond to cues, how they create “clear” and “meaningful” or “obscure” utterances, how they ratify or reject genres as fitting actions, and so forth. Using locality as the frame of reference to study audience design, face-work, and genre, these observations show, allows us to understand technology and discourse change in more nuanced ways. Thinking of genre as a kind of

“local knowledge” builds on genre theory’s observations but also gives genre theory a new terminology for talking about genre’s situatedness, beyond the limits of existing theories of genre as a product of a community, profession, or discipline. If we allow that genres are local knowledge, that people often try to protect the local but can also have historically-contingent and different attitudes toward the local (for example, people can be cosmopolitan, or signal one’s allegiance to a political ideal by taking one stance or another toward “the local”), then we can talk about rhetors’ “choices” in the face of change in a more meaningful way. Analyzing genre as “local knowledge” can also accommodate how knowledge or habits might become attached to “places” online, even to “technologies,” in ways which conflict with other localities.

*Metadiscourse: Beyond “Order” and “Standardization”*

Using locality as a frame of reference also helps us understand the phenomenon of public reflections on language change—both about CMD, and, I would suggest, about language change occurring in response to other technologies. Scholars and everyday folk have been generating, and continue to generate, a significant body of talk about how online communication affects self, sociality, and language. In order to understand this phenomenon, we need to acknowledge that metadiscourse—even when it just appears to be “common sense”—is more complex than straightforward “description” or even “instruction,” as it is often described. Other conclusions about CMD metadiscourse suggest that the purpose of such texts is to bring order out of chaos (Arditi, 2001), to maintain standards and protect an understanding of the distinction between speech and writing (Baron, 2002, 404), or to keep track of lexical changes (Crystal, 2001). Crystal, for example, suggests that glossaries and netiquette guides—instances of what I have

called “metadiscourse”—are descriptive, practical guides to the changes he observes; they tell us how to keep up with new terms and acronyms and with new conventions—to track language change so we do not get lost. Even so, he is somewhat taken aback by their proliferation (2002, 62). Taking a historical look at technologies such as the telegraph and the telephone, Baron identifies two factors which may influence users’ linguistic choices when they begin to write using a new technology and sees the relationship between them as a balance that changes over time. The first is “*externally generated prescriptions*,” metadiscourse like parental guidance, usage guides, and netiquette guides. The second is what she calls “*user-generated coping strategies*,” “individual or collective strategies for handling lexical issues or the challenges of written language” (2002, 404). Baron dismisses “externally generated prescriptions” for email as ineffective in that they do not enforce existing distinctions between speech and writing, informal and formal language—not asking why, if they are ineffective, they continue to be written and reproduced, as I have shown.

Older studies of metadiscourse can account in part for the intense, ongoing, and public authoring, reproduction, and citation of CMD. Studies of etiquette literature and of prescriptive discourse on language standards have shown that metadiscourse is robust in times of change; they too have observed that it can function as a strategy through which people assert their own social roles and protect existing social roles and relations. Social historical accounts of etiquette literature, for example, have observed that etiquette discourse—which often includes metadiscursive and metageneric elements such as instructions on letter writing—has been an active part of constructing class relations, race relations, and national identities (Wouters, 1995a, 1995b; Lasch-Quinn, 1999; Hemphill,

1999). And they have observed that in the face of changes like increasing urbanization, the creation of new social spaces like public transportation, the entry of women into business and sport, and the advent of the telephone, etiquette literature instructs readers on how to speak and write in their new settings (Bryson, 1998; Curtin, 1987). As discussed in Chapter One, Cameron (1995; 2000), Bourdieu (1991), Crowley (1989), and James and Lesley Milroy (1985) have observed the ways that talk about language “standards” (the “legitimate language” in Bourdieu’s case, “Standard English” in the others) has often functioned to produce, to borrow the Milroys’ phrase, an “ideology of standardization” (1985, 26) and to protect social capital. Talk about online language—as these studies might predict—does reproduce ideologically-based assumptions about speakers’ social roles and relations. This occurs in netiquette—an often prescriptive discourse with elements of etiquette literature and style guides; it also occurs in uptakes of “new” genres, like different kinds of blogs, which are recast in public meta-genre according to readers’ “knowledge” of social roles and the discourse that goes with those roles. I have also shown that this occurs in the instructions for and descriptions of older genres like petitions provided by institutions and organizations in the face of new technological developments. Petition websites cast electronic petitions as enhanced grassroots democracy and Members of Parliament hint that rejecting electronic petitions is undemocratic; in embracing the evolution of petitioning in these ways, they reproduce ideological assumptions about the kind of democracy (the kinds of relations between citizen voices and elected representatives) that should be protected.

These observers of etiquette and “verbal hygiene” (Cameron, 1995), drawing attention to metadiscourse as protecting social capital and existing insider/outsider

distinctions (Wouters, 1995a), however, do not fully account for how people are managing their own social roles and social relations in the ways they adapt to CMD and to perceptions of change. I have shown that public metadiscourse about CMD, driven in part by face-work and by the need to arrive at, maintain, or disrupt ideas about discourse types, serves a range of functions. Chapter One has shown popular culture's reflections on CMD tracking changes to the nature of self and community. Chapter Two shows how metadiscourse can inform how, in the face of new kinds of copresence, people estimate both the cognitive environments and the sense of responsibility for face-work and "relevance" of different "types" of interlocutors. Netiquette discourse, moreover, performs an added function: allowing interlocutors to signal their belonging to one locality or another and to *build* a common image of what knowledge is shared by others in the same social roles. The study of netiquette's emergence, authoring, and reauthoring also shows that such metadiscourse is not merely an incidental reporting or reflection of change. Rather, it is an important tool by which users can make sense of the ways that accounting for self and other (in Chapter Two, via "pragmatics" and "face-work") is different or the same in the new conditions of the internet.

As I have shown in Chapters Three and Four, moreover, people use metadiscourse to monitor and guide changes in the ways they can address other people or governments as well as address problems through writing/speaking. The emergence and reception of the homeless blog shows that through public meta-genre, subjects can celebrate—or fail to ratify—occasions for new kinds of writing and writing subjects. In familiar and established genres like the petition, public meta-genre about the email petition proved a tool for measuring new genre features against local images of the genre—and ultimately

of rejecting it. With the development of the electronic petition, meta-genre produced by petition sites both government-run and free has included descriptions of “e-petitioning” (as “just like regular petitioning, but better,” and a enhancing democracy), and, equally importantly, instructions (both in the form of rules and in the form of technical requirements such as required fields and methods of signature verification.) These types of meta-genre have argued that this genre of civic discourse is simultaneously the same—commensurate with expectations—and an opportunity for change.

Technology, finally, may be pushing metadiscourse to evolve; the new functions of metadiscourse observed here may indeed have emerged from the new conditions afforded by CMD: we are exposed to more meta-discourse and more diverse meta-discourse than before (all telling us something about technology, self, and the local); this discourse also takes place in new conditions of publicness, anonymity, and interactivity. These new conditions, I have suggested, expand the role that metadiscourse plays in asserting, recognizing, and negotiating local knowledge of language, self, and sociality. We may reject technological determinism, and caution scholars who presuppose the nature and effects of computer-mediated discourse that the meaning of a technology is a social construction. Even as this is so, my observations in these chapters suggest that technologies may change the *means* by which technologies are socially constructed.

### *Change: Implications for Action and Future Research*

At the start of this dissertation, in response to talk about CMD from scholars, governments, educators, activists, and others making assumptions about self, sociality, and language, I argue that we needed to look at CMD-spurred “change” and “newness”

by looking at language practices through which people manage social roles and relations. What does looking at these practices reveal about how CMD might bring change and newness to those social roles and relations? Seeing new tools (such as netiquette) for rhetors to situate themselves and others, new kinds of writing like the homeless blog and opportunities for marginalized subjects, and the evolution of electronic/petitioning in local geopolitical contexts, we have grounds for concluding that online communication can be a field of change. Observing these new kinds of discourse, we have also seen how much is at stake as speakers and writers invest personal resources and expose themselves to the risk of rejection or misunderstanding; and as institutions, organizations, and educators create policies and procedures based on beliefs about online communication as a field of change. However, in investing resources into online activism, online classrooms, online knowledge repositories, social networking platforms for the workplace, and so on—and in creating policies and regulations to respond to possibilities for change—we need to consider that the ways that language practices evolve online are guided by the ways that locality is constantly being reproduced as subjects draw on local knowledge.

The time for observing such evolution—for tracking subjects' consciousness of locality, language, and technology, and for observing where change can go forward or is constrained—is hardly finished, regardless of whether we might seem to be “slouching towards the ordinary” (Herring, 2004, 26) as some kinds of CMD become “normal” to us. Much has changed since I first began to think about computer-mediated discourse as a ground of change, as calling for close examination of CMD language practices in which people manage self and sociality. Some elements of CMD (different kinds of registers for

different kinds of emails; blogs; public comments attached to newspaper articles) have become normal and conventional in my local contexts. Some of these (like netiquette, translated into myriad languages, and conventions in electronic petitioning) have, moreover, spread far beyond the local contexts in which they emerged. Others (social networking services like Facebook and Twitter) have emerged that are now “old news” to some but which are now being taken up and reimagined by new users—like politicians’ and governments’ use of social networking sites: some observers, for example, credit Barack Obama’s use of Twitter and other social networking services as increasing his support among young voters; Canadian political parties like the NDP have created accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Friendfeed, and YouTube—not as social networking as it became conventional among earlier users but as a political campaigning tool. Governments now begin to look to social networking sites as a tool for innovation. Other kinds of CMD (like Japanese SMS novels published online) have emerged in other localities that may travel beyond their local origins; others not yet imagined will emerge.

We face, then, ongoing encounters with new affordances, with others’ perceptions of those affordances, with people from one context encountering conventions that emerge from other local contexts—with other kinds of technological and linguistic consciousnesses. These ongoing encounters inform the evolution of language practices through which we recognize others and arrange to be recognized ourselves, through which we patrol local borders, and through which we know “where” we are online. In this dissertation I have focused on face-work, the pragmatics of audience design, and genre, but other practices are similarly informed. As Greg Myers (1991) has pointed out, for instance, everyday people are adept at citing others and reporting others’ speech in

typified ways that perform sociorhetorical functions local to their communities. These and other everyday practices are also evolving in the face of new kinds of reproduction, new copyright laws, and local attitudes toward sharing knowledge. Future studies of practices like these may benefit from the observations I have made here.

Finally, we need also to consider that the dynamics I have studied here in computer-mediated discourse are also at work as discourse practices evolve in response to other communications technologies—multi-media devices like Blackberries or iPhones, for example. Examining netiquette and other public metadiscourse, the homeless blog, and electronic petitioning, I hope to have provided tools for examining the ongoing evolutions of these and other technology-mediated language practices: first, a way to talk about the dynamics of *locality* in CMD, which I have demonstrated is a productive way of framing speakers'/writers' choices in online face-work, audience design, and genre; second, a new understanding of how face-work informs pragmatics and genre; and finally an understanding of how metadiscourse itself is evolving in response to and informing change.

## Bibliography

- Allen, H. (2008, February 20). Why am I writing a blog? *Media assassin*.  
<http://harryallen.info/?p=54>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Allen, M. (2006, June 27). Wandering Scribe does book deal. *Grumpy Old Bookman*.  
 Retrieved May 6, 2007 from  
[http://grumpyoldbookman.blogspot.com/2006/06/wandering\\_scribe-does-book-deal.html](http://grumpyoldbookman.blogspot.com/2006/06/wandering_scribe-does-book-deal.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Alyceclover. *Homeless in Long Beach*. <<http://homelessmary.blogspot.com/>>
- AOL Canada testing wireless Internet access. (2004, March 11). *The Globe and Mail*, B.5.
- Arditi, J. (2001). Exploring Netiquette: figurations and reconfigurations in cybernetic space. In T. Salumets (Ed.), *Norbert Elias and human interdependencies* (84-98). Montreal: McGill-Queens UP.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Barbieux, K. *The Homeless Guy*. Until April 2007 and from Feb. 2008 at  
<http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com>; from April 2007-Feb. 2008 at  
 <<http://thehomelessguy.wordpress.com/>>
- . (2002, Sept. 1). Quote - "Books aren't written ..." *The Homeless Guy*. Retrieved Mar. 10 from  
[http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002\\_09\\_01\\_thehomelessguy\\_archive.html#81003312](http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002_09_01_thehomelessguy_archive.html#81003312). Last retrieved February 15, 2008.
- . (2002, Sept. 10). The Nashville rescue mission.... *The Homeless Guy*. Retrieved May 10, 2007 from  
[http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002\\_09\\_08\\_thehomelessguy\\_archive.html#81410177](http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002_09_08_thehomelessguy_archive.html#81410177). Last retrieved February 15, 2008.
- . (2002, Sept. 9). There still seems to be a bit of confusion... *The Homeless Guy*. Retrieved May 10, 2007 from  
[http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002\\_09\\_15\\_thehomelessguy\\_archive.html#81823127](http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2002_09_15_thehomelessguy_archive.html#81823127). Last retrieved February 15, 2008.
- . (2004, Dec. 5). What's it like? *The Homeless Guy*. Retrieved Mar. 25, 2007 from  
[http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2004/12/whats\\_it\\_like.html](http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/2004/12/whats_it_like.html)
- . (2004, Sept. 27). There are other homeless blogs... *The Homeless Guy*. Last retrieved Mar. 25, 2007.
- . (2006, Mar. 2). New homeless blog. *The Homeless Guy*. Retrieved Feb. 10, 2007.
- Baron, N. S. (2000). *Alphabet to email: how written English evolved and where it's heading*. London; New York: Routledge.
- . (2002). Who sets e-mail style? Prescriptivism, coping strategies, and democratizing communication access. *Information Society*, 18(5), 403-413.
- Baym, N. K. (1994). The Emergence of on-line community. In S. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety 2.0: revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- . (2006). Interpersonal Life Online. In S. Livingstone & L. Lievrouw (Eds.) *The handbook of new media, Student Edition*. Sage Publications.

- Bazerman, Charles. (2002). Genre and identity: Citizenship in the age of the internet and the age of global capitalism. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (13-37). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- . (1994). Systems of genres and the enactment of social intentions. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (79-101). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Bell, D. and Kennedy, B. M. (2000). *The cybercultures reader*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Bell, D., Loader, B., Pleace, N., & Schuler, D. (2004). Electronic Democracy (E-Democracy). In D. Bell, B. Loader, N. Pleace & D. Schuler (Eds.), *Cyberculture: the key concepts* (58-61). London ; New York: Routledge.
- Berkenkotter, C. (2001). Genre systems at work: DSM-IV and rhetorical recontextualization in psychotherapy paperwork. *Written Communication* 18(3), 326-349.
- Since Sept. 1991. Weekly since June. *The Big Issue Magazine*. London: The Big Issue Company Ltd.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11(2), 59-81.
- Bitzer, L. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, 1-14.
- Blacker, T. (2006, June 2). A new way to break into the book world. *The Independent online edition*. Retrieved Mar. 6, 2007 from <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/terence-blacker/terence-blacker-a-new-way-to-break-into-the-book-world-480708.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Blood, R. (2000, September 7). Weblogs: A history and perspective. *Rebecca's Pocket*. Retrieved August 10, 2007, from [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Bloom, R. (2004, September 28). Broadband use up sharply among firms: Statscan *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.15.
- Boczkowski, P.J. (2004). *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers*. Inside Technology. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation: understanding new media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Borowitz, S. M., & Wyatt, J. C. (1998). The origin, content, and workload of e-mail consultations. *JAMA*, 280(15), 1321-1324.
- Bourdieu, P., & Thompson, J. B. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge [Eng.]: Polity Press.
- Breckenridge, J.W. *Homeless in Abbotsford*. <http://homeless-in-abbotsford.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Brooks, K., Nichols, C. and Priebe, S. (2004). Remediation, genre, and motivation: Key concepts for teaching with weblogs. In L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, community, and*

- culture of weblogs*. [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/remediation\\_genre.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/remediation_genre.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Brown, M. *View from the Sidewalk*. <http://view-sidewalk.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Brown, M.W. *Norsehorse's Old Home Turf*. <http://norsehorses-turf.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bryson, A. (1998). *From courtesy to civility: changing codes of conduct in early modern England*. London; New York: Clarendon Press.
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (1993, Oct. 8). A Network Called Internet. (2001, August 2). Canadian, U.S. women lead Web use: study. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.23.
- CanLaw. Petitioning the House of Commons: A Practical Guide. <http://www.canlaw.com/parliament/petitionparliament.htm>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Care2Petition. from <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Cherny, L. (1999). *Conversation and community: chat in a virtual world*. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI Publications.
- Chiefs of the Interior Tribes of British Columbia. (May 23, 1913). Statement of Chiefs of the Interior Tribes of British Columbia.
- Clark, H. & Brennan, S. (1991). Grounding in communication. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (127-149). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Clark, H. H. (1992). *Arenas of language use*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, H. H. & Marshall, C. R. (1992). Definite reference and mutual knowledge. In H. Clark (Ed.), *Arenas of language use* (9-59). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, H. H. & Schaefer, E. F. (1992). Dealing with overhearers. In H. Clark (Ed.), *Arenas of language use* (248-297). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, H. H. & Carlson, T. B.. (1992). Hearers and speech acts. In H. Clark (Ed.), *Arenas of language use* (248-297). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crisis & Hansard Society. (July 21, 2005). Weblogs--A powerful voice for campaigns? Pamphlet. Available for download at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/downloads/archive/2007/08/21/Weblogs.aspx>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Crispen, P. (1994). Lesson 7: Netiquette. In *Internet roadmap: Be on the Net*. <http://www.beonthenet.com/map07.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Christian, James. *Homeless Guy in Nyc*. <http://the-homeless-guy-in-nyc.bravejournal.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Chu, S. (2003, February 13). On-line dating firms heat up cyberspace. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.13.
- Coe, R., L. Lingard, and T. Teslenko. (2002). Genre as action, strategy, and *differance*: An introduction. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (1-10). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Coughlan, Sean. (2006, May 31). Parked up. *BBC News*.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/5029984.stm>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Crosson, S. (2008). *Saving the World from Down on the Farm: Violet McNaughton, Interwar Feminism and Women's Anti-War Activism in the Prairies*. Paper presented at the Buffalo History Conference.
- Crowley, T. (1989). *Standard English and the politics of language*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curtin, M. (1987). *Propriety and position: a study of Victorian manners*. New York: Garland.
- Dahlberg, L. (2001). Democracy via cyberspace: mapping the rhetorics and practices of three prominent camps. *New media & society* 3(2).
- Daosu. (2002, Aug 31). Homeless blog stumbled across. *LXSS*. Retrieved Feb. 14, 2008 from <http://7xss.wordpress.com/2002/08/31/homeless-blog-stumbled-across/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Dean, J. (2001). Cybersalons and civil society: Rethinking the public sphere in transnational technoculture. *Public Culture* 13(2): 243-265.
- Defren, T. (2006, March 29). A blog is not a newsletter. PR Squared. [http://www.pr-squared.com/2006/03/a\\_blog\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_newsletter.html](http://www.pr-squared.com/2006/03/a_blog_is_not_a_newsletter.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- de Oliveira, S. M. (2003). Breaking conversational norms on a Portuguese users network: Men as adjudicators of politeness? *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, 9(1).
- Devitt, A. J. 1991. Intertextuality in tax accounting: Generic, referential, and functional. In *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*, C. Bazerman & J. G. Paradis (eds), 336-57. Madison, Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P.
- (2003, August 12). Dial-up holds its own. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.7.
- Diderichsen, A. (2006). Augmented communication: The communicative potential of the Internet. *Lund University Cognitive Studies* 132.
- Dillon, A., & Gushrowski, B. 2000. Genres and the web: Is the personal home page the first uniquely digital genre? *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 51 (2): 202-05.
- Doheny-Farina, S. (1996). *The wired neighborhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Guy Dixon. (2000, November 17). Canadian Internet use keeps climbing. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.3.
- Ebner, D. (2003, December 3). Bell eyes Internet in rural Que., Ont.. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.4.
- . (2003, September 17). Canadians connect at high speed. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B.8
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* (11)2. Available at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/ellison.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.

- EPetitions: facts, figures and progress. (June 20, 2007). At #10 Downing St. EPetitions <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>. Last retrieved September 21, 2007.
- Epetitions.net. <http://epetitions.net/> Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Ess, C. (1996). *Philosophical perspectives on computer-mediated communication*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eysenbach, G., & Diepgen, T. L. (1998). Responses to unsolicited patient e-mail requests for medical advice on the World Wide Web. *JAMA*, 280(15), 1333-1335.
- Featherstone, M. (1996). Localism, globalism, and cultural identity. In R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (46-77). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fernback, J. (1998). There is a there there: *Notes toward a definition of cybercommunity*. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Doing Internet research : critical issues and methods for examining the Net* (203-220). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Ferrara, K., H. Brunner, and G. Whittlemore. (1991). Interactive written discourse as an emergent register. *Written Communication*, 8(1), 8-34.
- Fox, N., & Roberts, C. (1999). GPs in cyberspace: The sociology of a "virtual community." *Sociological Review*, 47(4)
- Freadman, A. (2002). Uptake. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (39-53). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Freedman, A., & Medway, P. (1994). Locating genre studies: Antecedents and prospects. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (1-22). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Geisler, C. B., Doheny-Farina, S. Gurak, L. Haas, C. Johnson- Eilola, J., Kaufer, D., Lunsford, A., Miller, C., Winsor, D. and Yates, J. (2001). IText: Future directions for research on the relationship between information technology and writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 15(3), 269-308.
- Gibson, J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, Acting and Knowing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Giltrow, J. (2002). Meta-genre. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (187-205). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- . and Stein, D. Forthcoming. Introduction. In *Genres in the Internet: Innovation, evolution, and genre theory*. J. Giltrow and D. Stein (Eds). Forthcoming: Benjamins.
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry: Journal of Interpersonal Relations* 18 (3), 213-31.
- . (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- GoPetition. <http://www.gopetition.com/> Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Grafton, K, and Maurer, E. (2007, August 16). Public engagements and public arrangements of blog genres. *Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Genre Studies, August 15-18, 2007*, 164-74. University of Southern Santa

- Catarina. Tubarão, Brazil.  
<http://www3.unisul.br/paginas/ensino/pos/linguagem/cd/English/17i.pdf> Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Greenspon, E. (2000, October 24). The Chief Electoral Nanny v. Ivan Smith. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A.21.
- Gregory, A. (Artist). (July 5, 1993). *I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking* [comic]. *The New Yorker*.
- Gurak, L. (2004). Internet Studies in the twenty-first century. In D. Gauntlett & R. Horsley (Eds.), *Web studies* (24-33). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gurak, L. a. J. L. (2003). Internet Protests, from Text to Web. In M. McCaughey & M. D. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice* (25-46). New York: Routledge.
- Gurak, L. J. (1997). *Persuasion and privacy in cyberspace : the online protests over Lotus MarketPlace and the Clipper chip*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hansard. (2000). *36th Parliament, 2nd Session Debates*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=36&Ses=2&DocId=2332224>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (March 21, 2001). *37th Parliament, 1st Session Debates, No. 33*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=36&Ses=2&DocId=2332224>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (May 29, 2000). *36th Parliament, 2nd Session Debates*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=36&Ses=2&DocId=2332224>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (May 30, 2008). *39th Parliament, 2nd Session Debates*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=36&Ses=2&DocId=2332224>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (November 22, 2007). *39th Parliament, 2nd Session Debates*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=36&Ses=2&DocId=2332224>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (November 26, 2004). *38th Parliament, 1st Session, No. 33*.  
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=38&Ses=1&DocId=1516241>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Hansard. (February 3, 2005.) *Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs*. 38th Parliament, 1st Session.
- Haraway, D. 1997.  
*Modest Witness@Second Millenium.FemaleMan[copyright] Meets OncoMouse [TM]: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.
- Hayles, N. K. (1990). *Chaos bound: orderly disorder in contemporary literature and science*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . (1999). *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hemphill, C. D. (1999). *Bowing to necessities: a history of manners in America, 1620-1860*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herring, S. (2001). Computer-mediated discourse. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (612-634). Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.

- . (2004). Slouching toward the ordinary: Current trends in computer-mediated communication. *New Media and Society*, 6(1), 26-36.
- ., Scheidt, L., Wright, E., Bonus, S. (2005). Weblogs as a bridging genre. *Information, Technology & People* 18(2).
- ., Kouper, I., Scheidt, L.A., & Wright, E.L. 2004. Women and children last: The discursive construction of weblogs. In L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, community, and culture of weblogs*.  
[http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/women\\_and\\_children.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/women_and_children.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Heyd, T. forthcoming. *A model for describing 'new' and 'old' properties of CMC genres: The case of Digital Folklore (DF)*. In J. Giltrow and D. Stein (Eds.) *Genres in the Internet: Innovation, evolution, and genre theory*. Forthcoming: Benjamins.
- Hongladarom, S. (2001). Global culture, local cultures, and the Internet: the Thai example. In C. Ess & F. Sudweeks (Eds.), *Culture, technology, communication: towards an intercultural global village* (307-324). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Humphrey, M. 2003, Mar. 17. Homeless man Caught between Cyberspace and the Streets. *USA Today (Web Ed)*. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2007 from [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2003-03-17-homeless-blog\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2003-03-17-homeless-blog_x.htm)
- iPetition.com. <http://www.ipetitions.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Jaffe, J. M., Lee, Y. E., Huang, L. N., & Oshagan, H. (1999). Gender identification, interdependence, and pseudonyms in CMC: Language patterns in an electronic conference. *Information Society*, 15(4), 221 - 234.
- Jamieson, K. 1975. Antecedent genre as rhetorical constraint. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61: 406-15.
- . 1982. Rhetorical hybrids: Fusions of generic elements. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68: 146-57.
- Kiesler, S., Siegel, J. and McGuire, T. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer mediated communication. *American Psychologist*, 39, 1123-1134.
- Killoran, J. B. (2006). Self-Published web résumés: Their purposes and their genre systems. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 20(4), 425-459.
- Kohrs Campbell, K. & Jamieson, K. (1979). Form and genre in rhetorical criticism: An introduction. In K. Kohrs Campbell & K. Jamieson (Eds.), *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action* (9-32). Falls Church: The Speech Communication Association.
- Lasch-Quinn, E. (1999). How to behave sensitively: prescriptions for interracial conduct from the 1960s to the 1990s. *Journal of Social History*, 33(2), 409-427.
- Lavender, T. *Homeless: It's no game*. <http://www.homelessgame.net/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Macintosh, A., Davenport, E., Malina, A. and Whyte, A. (2001). Technology to support participatory democracy. In A. Gronlund (ed). *Electronic government: Design, applications, and management*. London, Idea Group Publishing.

- Maguire, T. (20 April, 2006). No One Knows You're a Dog. 2008, [http://justoneminute.typepad.com/main/2006/04/no\\_one\\_knows\\_yo.html](http://justoneminute.typepad.com/main/2006/04/no_one_knows_yo.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Marleau, R. & Monpetit, C. (2000). *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. <http://www.parl.gc.ca/MarleauMontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?DocId=1001&Sec=Ch001&Seq=1&Lang=E>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Marvin, C. (1988). *When old technologies were new: thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McOrmond, R. (Mar. 28, 2007). Mr. Angus tables petition signatures to protect Information Technology property rights! *Digital Copyright Canada*. <http://www.digital-copyright.ca/node/3841>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . (July 3, 2008). Signatures received for the Petition to protect Information Technology property rights. *Digital Copyright Canada*. <http://www.digital-copyright.ca/petition/ict/signatures.shtml>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- McCoy, J. (2005). Still Awake. *Journal*. Retrieved from <http://jamiesbigvoice.blogspot.com/2005/11/still-awake.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . Blogging. London, July 21, 2005. In *Weblogs--A powerful voice for campaigns?* 4-5. Hansard Society; Crisis. Available for download at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/downloads/archive/2007/08/21/Weblogs.aspx>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . *Jamie's Big Voice*. <http://jamiesbigvoice.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . *Jamie's World of Poetry*. <http://jamiespoetry.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- McNeill, L. forthcoming. Brave new genre, or generic colonialism? Debates over ancestry in internet diaries. In J. Giltrow and D. Stein (Eds), *Genres in the Internet: Innovation, evolution, and genre theory*. Benjamins.
- Mele, C. (1999). Cyberspace and disadvantaged communities: the Internet as a Tool for Collective Action. In M. Smith, & P. Kolock, P. (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (290-310). London: Routledge.
- Menchú, R., & Burgos-Debray, E. (1984). *I, Rigoberta Menchú : an Indian woman in Guatemala*. London: Verso.
- Mernit, S. (2004, June 16). When is the blogosphere (not) like a dog park? *Susan Mernit*. <http://www.susanmernit.com/blog/2004/06/when-is-the-blogosphere-not-li.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008
- Miller, C. 1994. Genre as social action. In A. Freedman and P. Medway (eds), *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, (23-42.) London: Taylor & Francis. (Original work published 1984).
- Miller, C. and Shepherd, D. 2004, June. Blogging as social action: A genre analysis of the weblog. In L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, community, and culture of weblogs*. [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blgging as social action a genre analysis of the weblog.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blgging%20as%20social%20action%20a%20genre%20analysis%20of%20the%20weblog.html). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.

- . and ---. forthcoming. Questions for genre theory from the Blogosphere. In J. Giltrow and D. Stein (Eds), *Genres in the Internet: Innovation, evolution, and genre theory*. Benjamins.
- Milroy, J., & Milroy, L. (1985). *Authority in language: investigating language prescription and standardisation*. London: Routledge & K. Paul.
- Moore, T. (2008). Personal communication.
- Murray, D. E. (1991). The composing process for computer conversation. *Written Communication*, 8(1), 35-55.
- Myers, G. (1999). Functions of reported speech in group discussions. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(3), 376-401.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Nishimura, Y. (2003). Linguistic Innovations and Interactional Features of Casual Online Communication in Japanese. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, 9(1), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol9/issue1/nishimura.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Norman, D. A. (1999). Affordances, conventions, and design. *Interactions* 6(3), 38-42.
- . (2002) *The design of everyday things* (1st Basic paperback. ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Ogles, J. 2006, June 22. Laptops Give Hope to the Homeless. *Wired*. Retrieved Feb. 15, 2007 from <http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2006/06/71153>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups. *New Media & Society* 6(2), 259-83.
- Pare, A. (2002). Genre and identity: individuals, institutions, and ideology. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (57-71). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Peters, A. Wandering scribe. <http://wanderingscribe.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . 2007. *Abandoned: The true story of a little girl that didn't belong*. London: Harper Element.
- PetitionOnline. from <http://www.petitiononline.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Poster, M. (1996). Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet Culture*. (201-217). New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the public sphere? *What's the matter with the Internet?* 171-88. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rorty, R. (1998). Justice as a larger loyalty. In F. Cheah and B. Robbins (Eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (45-58): University of Minnesota Press.
- Schryer, C. F. (2002). Genre and power: A chronotopic analysis. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and ideology of genre: Strategies for stability and change* (73-102). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Scottish Parliament. Public petitions committee--epetitions.  
<http://epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Selfe, C. L., & Meyer, P. R. (1991). Testing claims from on-line conferences. *Written Communication*, 8(2), 163-192.
- Shachtman, N. The homeless blogger. *Salon*, Oct. 14, 2002. 1-2. Retrieved Feb. 1, 2006 from <http://dir.salon.com/story/tech/feature/2002/10/14/homeless/index.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Shepherd, M. and Watters, C. (1998). The evolution of cybergenres. *Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences: IEEE Computer Society*. 97-109. Vol. 2.
- Smith, O. (1984). *The politics of language, 1791-1819*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Sterne, J. (2003). Bourdieu, Technique, and Technology. *Cultural Studies*, 17(3-4), 367 - 389.
- Stoll, D. (1999). *Rigoberta Menchú and the story of all poor Guatemalans*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Sturges, P. (2002). Remember the human: the first rule of netiquette, librarians and the Internet. *Online Information Review*, 26(3), 209-216.
- Taylor, J. A. & Burt, E. (1999). Parliaments on the Web: Learning through innovation. *Parliamentary Affairs* 52(3), 503-517.
- Tofts, D., Jonson, A., & Cavallaro, A. (2003). *Prefiguring cyberculture: an intellectual history*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- (2003, December 22). Two-thirds of Canadians surf the Net, survey says. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A.7.
- United Nations World Food Program. Food Force. Retrieved Aug. 15, 2007 from <http://www.food-force.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Van Lier, P. (1999). Selling the street beat. *Quill* 78 (8), 16-20.
- Vegh, S. (2003). Classifying Forms of Online Activism: The Case of Cyberprotests against the World Bank. In M. McCaughey & M. D. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice* (71-96). New York: Routledge.
- Walker, J. (2005). Blog (weblog). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. D. Herman, M. Jahn and M. Ryan. London; New York: Routledge, 45.
- wanderingscribe. *Wandering Ego*. <http://wanderingego.blogspot.com/>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . (2006, May 19). Did I mention my blog? *Wandering Ego*. Retrieved Feb. 10, 2008 from <http://wanderingego.blogspot.com/2006/05/did-i-mention-my-book.html>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Warschauer, M. (2003). *Technology and social inclusion: rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. NY: Zone Books.
- Watts, A. and E. Mitra. (2002). Theorizing cyberspace: The idea of voice applied to the internet discourse. *New Media & Society* 4 (4), 479-498.
- Wellman, B., & Gulia, M. (1999). Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (167-194). London: Routledge.

- Wikipedia. (2008, Feb. 9). Wandering Scribe. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved Feb 13, 2008 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering\\_Scribe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering_Scribe). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- . (2006, Aug. 26). Talk: Wandering Scribe. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved Feb 13, 2008 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering\\_Scribe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering_Scribe). Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Williams, L. (June 22, 2004). Blog etiquette. *Learning the lessons of Nixon*. <http://www.cadence90.com/wp/index.php?cat=18>. Last retrieved December 10, 2008.
- Wouters, C. (1995a). Etiquette books and emotion management in the 20th century: part one--the integration of social classes. *Journal of Social History*, 29, 107-124.
- Wouters, C. (1995b). Etiquette books and emotion management in the 20th century: part two--the integration of the sexes. *Journal of Social History*, 29, 325-339.
- Wynn, E. and Katz, J.E. (1997). Hyperbole over cyberspace: Self-presentation and social boundaries in Internet home pages and discourse. *The Information Society* 13(4), 297-327.
- Yoon, S. (2001). Internet discourse and the Habitus of Korea's new generation. In C. Ess & F. Sedgwick (Eds.), *Culture, technology, communication: towards an intercultural global village* (241-260). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Zaeske, S. (2003). *Signatures of citizenship: petitioning, antislavery, and women's political identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Yates, J. & Orlikowski, W. (2002). Genre systems: Chronos and kairos in communicative interaction. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre* (103-121). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

## Appendix A

### Presentation-of-Petition Corpus

The presentations-of-petition in the corpus are listed below in the reverse chronological order of their presentation. They are listed according to the titles displayed above each presentation in the Hansard transcripts.

All documents in the corpus appear in the online Hansard transcripts of the 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament House of Commons *Debates*. Dates and volume numbers are listed below.

Webpages were last retrieved December 10, 2008.

May 30, 2008

Edited Hansard #102

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3532310>

1. Unborn Victims of Crime
2. Darfur
3. Unborn Victims of Crime
4. Human Rights
5. Property Crime
6. Canada Post Corporation
7. Nahanni National Park
8. Sponsorship Program

May 29, 2008

Edited Hansard #101

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3529225>

9. Citizenship and Immigration
10. Temporary Workers
11. Unborn Victims of Crime

May 28, 2008

Edited Hansard #100

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3523957>

12. The Quebec Nation and the Charter of the French Language

13. Bill C-420
14. Mining Companies Working Abroad
15. Unborn Victims of Crime
16. Iran
17. Citizenship and Immigration
18. Cluster Munitions
19. Income Trusts
20. Arts and Culture
21. Unborn Victims of Crime
22. Age of Consent
23. Animal Cruelty
24. Unborn Victims of Crime

May 27, 2008

Edited Hansard #99

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3519792>

25. Asbestos
26. Unborn Victims of Crime

May 26, 2008

Edited Hansard #98

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3465941>

27. Asbestos
28. Human Rights
29. Jordan's Principle
30. Arts and Culture
31. Unborn Victims of Crime
32. Consumer Price Index
33. Arts and Culture
34. Arts and Culture

May 16, 2008

Edited Hansard #97

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3507974>

35. Income Trusts
36. Power Lines
37. Health
38. Unborn Victims of Crime
39. Omar Khadr

May 15

Edited Hansard #96

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3504905>

40. Criminal Code
41. *Komagata Maru* Incident
42. Bill 101
43. Arts and Culture

May 14

Edited Hansard #95

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3499224>

44. Mohamed Kohail
45. Unborn Victims of Crime
46. Bill C-482—Charter of the French Language
47. Seniors
48. Sealing Industry
49. Wikanis Mamiwinnik Community, La Sarre
50. Heritage Sites
51. Income Tax Act—Bill C-207
52. Taxation
53. Animal Cruelty Legislation
54. Income Trusts
55. Aboriginal Affairs

May 13

Edited Hansard #94

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3494479&File=0#SOBQ-2469476#SOBQ-2469476>

56. Prostitution
57. Safe Drug Injection Site
58. Arts and Culture
59. Unborn Victims of Crime
60. Do Not Call List

May 9, 2008

Edited Hansard #92

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3484327>

61. Unborn Victims of Crime
62. Human Rights
63. Unborn Victims of Crime
64. Unborn Victims of Crime
65. Cluster Bombs

May 8, 2008

Edited Hansard #91

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3481542>

66. Darfur
67. Darfur
68. Property Crime Legislation
69. Animal Cruelty Legislation

May 7, 2008

Edited Hansard #90

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3475750>

70. Quebec Nation and Bill 101
71. Unborn Victims of Crime
72. Canada Post
73. Canada Pension Plan
74. Post-Secondary Education
75. Public Transit
76. Child Labour

May 6, 2008

Edited Hansard #89

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3471265>

77. Unborn Victims of Crime
78. Pet Food
79. Income Trusts
80. Canada Pension Plan

May 2, 2008

Edited Hansard #87

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3463293>

81. Status of Women
82. Sri Lanka

- 83. Aboriginal Children
- 84. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- 85. Security and Prosperity Partnership

May 1, 2008

Edited Hansard #86

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3459414>

- 86. French as the language of work
- 87. Income Trusts

April 30, 2008

Edited Hansard #85

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3453748>

- 88. South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve
- 89. Immigration
- 90. Cluster Bombs
- 91. Missing Persons
- 92. Student Loans
- 93. Emergency Service Volunteers
- 94. Security and Prosperity Partnership
- 95. Income Trusts

April 29, 2008

Edited Hansard #84

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3448620>

- 96. Income Trusts
- 97. Unborn Victims of Crime

April 28, 2008

Edited Hansard #83

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3443504>

- 98. Income Trusts
- 99. Student Loans
- 100. Sponsorship Program

## Appendix B

### Electronic Petitions Corpus

Petition titles, authors, and dates (if known) are listed below. Spelling and capitalization of names and titles has been reproduced without change from the originals.

For each petition, two URLs have been provided:

1. petition page with description and “prayer, and
2. page with instructions for visitors who decide to sign the petition.

Both of these pages created by each petition author.

#### *GoPetition Petitions*

1. “Calgary Airport Traffic Noise”

author: calgaryairportnoise

Feb 19, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/calgary-airport-traffic-noise.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/calgary-airport-traffic-noise/sign.html>

2. “Canadians: Stop the Global Food Crisis”

author: Elizabeth Hammond and Emily Ondercin-Bourne

May 25, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-global-food-crisis.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-global-food-crisis/sign.html>

3. “End Horse Slaughter in Canada Now”

author: Shana-Lee virgin

Nov 22, 2004

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/end-horse-slaughter-in-canada-now.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/end-horse-slaughter-in-canada-now/sign.html>

4. “Free Robert Latimer”

author: Phil Heilman

Dec 05, 2007

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/free-robert-latimer.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/free-robert-latimer/sign.html>

5. “Help Get Billy Mason's DNA Submitted For Testing & Comparison”

author: Jennifer Foster

Aug 29, 2007

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/get-billy-masons-dna-submitted-for-testing.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/get-billy-masons-dna-submitted-for-testing/sign.html>

6. "Hepatitis C - Forgotten Victims"

author: Pierrette Villeneuve

Dec 16, 2007

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/hepatitis-c-forgotten-victims.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/hepatitis-c-forgotten-victims/sign.html>

7. "OPPOSE Bill C-484 - REJETEZ Bill C-484"

author: Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada - Coalition pour la droit à l'avortement au Canada

Feb 11, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/oppose-bill-c-484.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/oppose-bill-c-484/sign.html>

8. "Quebec desperately needs to upgrade it's animal-welfare laws"

author: melanie

Jun 02, 2007

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/quebec-desperately-needs-to-upgrade-its-animal-welfare-laws.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/quebec-desperately-needs-to-upgrade-its-animal-welfare-laws/sign.html>

9. "Stop Bill C-51"

author: Sharon

May 31, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-bill-c-51.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-bill-c-51/sign.html>

10. "Stop Canada Condoning Death Penalty"

author: Bobby

Nov 05, 2007

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-canada-condoning-death-penalty.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-canada-condoning-death-penalty/sign.html>

11. "Stop repression of fathers' rights through de facto custody"

author: Andrew Harris

Jan 20, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/fathers-rights.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/fathers-rights/sign.html>

12. "Support Bill C-484 "

author: Eric Stephen

Mar 11, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/bill-c-484.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/bill-c-484/sign.html>

13. "Tougher mandatory sentences for those who abuse, assault and exploit children"

author: Amanda Shepperd

Apr 18, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/tougher-mandatory-sentences-for-child-pornography.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/tougher-mandatory-sentences-for-child-pornography/sign.html>

14. "Will You Show Up to the Free Speech Rally?"

author: John Pacheco

Feb 10, 2008

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/free-speech-rally.html>

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/free-speech-rally/sign.html>

#### *Petition Online Petitions*

1. "Attawapiskat School"

author: P. Dobson

<http://new.petitiononline.com/h44c55/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/h44c55/petition-sign.html>

2. "Canada out of Afghanistan"

author: Sharyl Thompson

<http://www.petitiononline.com/pe070215/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/pe070215/petition-sign.html>

3. "Enemy of Sikhs - Honoured Annually by Government of Canada"

author: Justice Singh

<http://www.petitiononline.com/WCH/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/WCH/petition-sign.html>

4. "Change Name of Canada's NEW Government"

author: Tim Edwards

<http://new.petitiononline.com/notnew/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/notnew/petition-sign.html>

5. "Government of Canada must accept the results of the Peace Tower Motion"

author: Anthony Wittrock

<http://www.petitiononline.com/ptmotion/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/ptmotion/petition-sign.html>

6. "Harmonization of Canadian Motor Vehicle Safety and Environmental Standards With Those of The United States"

author: Curtis Bars

<http://www.petitiononline.com/lesscash/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/lesscash/petition-sign.html>

7. "Increase Canada's Foreign Aid"

author: Alyssa Parpia

<http://new.petitiononline.com/canadaid/petition.html>

<http://new.petitiononline.com/canadaid/petition-sign.html>

8. "It's Fair to Share - Permitting Income Splitting in Canada"

author: caregiving coalitions of Canada; Beverley Smith

<http://www.petitiononline.com/share/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/share/petition-sign.html>

9. "Make Turks & Caicos part of Canada"

author: Pressgang readers; Chris Frampton

<http://www.petitiononline.com/pressgng/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/pressgng/petition-sign.html>

10. "Petition to end Official Bilingualism: Stop the waste and discrimination"

author: Kim McConnell

<http://www.petitiononline.com/ottawa/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/ottawa/petition-sign.html>

11. "PETITION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA ON THE INVESTIGATION OF UNSOLVED CASES OF MISSING/MURDERED FIRST NATIONS WOMEN"

author: Vanished Voices-NEVER AGAIN! Project; Amber O'Hara (Waabnong Kwe).

<http://www.petitiononline.com/tsalagi1/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/tsalagi1/petition-sign.html>

12. "Petition to the Government of Canada on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict"

author: Canadians For Peace With Justice In The Middle East; Ghada Mahmoud

<http://www.petitiononline.com/1petitio/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/1petitio/petition-sign.html>

13. "Stop Morgentaler from receiving Order of Canada"

author: All those who choose life for the unborn; Marianne McCormick

<http://www.petitiononline.com/cancath/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/cancath/petition-sign.html>

14. "To The Government Of Canada For A New Automotive Policy"

author: Tom Traverse

<http://www.petitiononline.com/NoKorea/petition.html>

<http://www.petitiononline.com/NoKorea/petition-sign.html>