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RHETORIC, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND PRIVACY

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates notions and practices related to privacy in social media environments. I argue for a social and rhetorical understanding of privacy in social media environments, involving attention to how the affordances of digital media affect how privacy is practiced in these environments. For example, the aggregation of data in digital media means that control over access to information is thoroughly distributed throughout one’s social network online: one’s privacy is as much dependent upon others’ practices and user settings as it is on one’s own.

In order to explore privacy in these environments, I analyze popular discourses about privacy online, user interfaces, and user practices related to privacy in these environments. I explore four concepts interrelated to privacy: materiality, identity, intimacy, and sociability. Chapter 2 explores the material practices of managing privacy in public spaces using objects, including mobile phones and laptops, arguing that despite popular narratives that users do not have a sense of place when cocooned behind devices, that people use these devices in contextual ways in order to engage in their environments and manage privacy.

Chapter 3 explores how identity shifts in online environments: Identity now becomes a series of digital traces that people use in order to construct others’ identities through their private information posted in various locations online. Private information is now externalized and less secure online. Chapter 4 explores the moral panic around sexting, the sharing of nude or sexually provocative images and text through text messages on mobile phones. This chapter argues that the moral panic blames young girls and women for their indiscretions disproportionately compared to those who violate privacy by forwarding images on. Privacy is incredibly gendered, and our culture has yet to extend the sorts of expectations and rights of privacy to women and girls as it extends to boys and men.
In Chapter 5, I argue that grand narratives about declining sociability ignore the situated material and embodied practices of sociability in environments. I argue that in order to understand how shifts in privacy practices affect sociability, scholars need to attend to the specific architectures and embodied practices of users within specific ecologies. This project concludes with a heuristic for digital literacies of privacy in social media environments, outlined in the concluding chapter. I argue for a set of practices that involves functional, critical, and rhetorical literate practices that can be practiced in a variety of contexts.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Rhetoric, Social Media, and Privacy

In early 2012 the Russian app developer i-Free Innovations released a new iPhone and iPad app called Girls Around Me in Apple’s App Store. Girls Around Me, as the name suggests, was a location-based app that offered users a map of their surrounding area with pictures of local women plotted onto the map (alternatively, a user could opt to find men instead of women). The app drew on the public application programming interfaces (APIs) for Google Maps, Facebook, and Foursquare in order to map the publicly available Facebook profiles of local people who had checked into a location using Foursquare, a social media service that allows users to share where they are located by “checking in” at places (see Figure 1-1). Simply by tapping on a profile picture plotted onto the map, a user could see someone’s publicly available Facebook pictures and name, know how long ago they had checked in at the location, and send a message to their Facebook account.

When Cult of Mac blogger John Brownlee wrote about the app in March 2012, he explained how the app worked and stressed the need for readers to educate their friends about privacy settings on social networking sites. Importantly, he stressed that the developers of Girls Around Me likely saw this as a harmless app, not a device for stalkers and rapists, and that the app did not violate Apple’s policies for the App Store. Rather, the app’s existence points to the difficulties in managing privacy on social networking sites. Facebook users might not be aware that their profile is public, nor that their profile information is available through Facebook’s API. Additionally, they may not realize that by linking their Foursquare account to their public Facebook profile, that they make this aggregated data more readily available: These data points,
when publicly available, can be aggregated into other applications, services, and databases legally and quite easily.

![Screen captures of the opening image from the iPhone app Girls Around Me (left) and a map with women’s Facebook profile pictures charted on it from the app (right) (Source: Brownlee)](image)

After Brownlee’s blog post circulated on various social networking sites, Foursquare pulled access to its data from the application, and the developers followed up by removing the application from Apple’s App Store, citing the necessity to fix bugs in the app that led to error messages. They also stressed that their intentions were not to violate Facebook and Foursquare users’ privacy, but rather to allow users to find public “hot spots” nearby (Kafka). Despite the app developers’ claimed good intentions, Brownlee and various others called the app “creepy” and a “wake-up call about privacy.”
Girls Around Me is situated in a long line of technological developments over the last
decade or so that have led scholars and the popular media to attend to changing practices and
technologies related to privacy. In their contribution to *Into the Blogosphere*, rhetoric and writing
scholars Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd explore how practices related to the public/private
distinction shifted in the use of blogs, which remediated diaries in publicly available settings. The
popular press has focused on various privacy concerns, including fears that youth are in danger of
sexual predators on sites like MySpace and Facebook (e.g., B. Stone), and that employers were
now searching Facebook profiles of potential employees for incriminating photos and posts (e.g.,
“Online Party Crashers”). And recently, rhetoric and writing scholars Gina Maranto and Matt
Barton explore the implications of teachers possibly sharing information on sites that
administrators may find inappropriate, or that might harm their ethos with students—just to cite a
few examples.

This dissertation explores the rhetorical dimensions of privacy in social media
environments, analyzing the rhetorical forces the help to constitute notions and practices of
privacy in social media contexts. Rather than understand privacy as something that needs to be
protected or as something that users online are “giving up,” as many popular discourses portray it,
I argue that privacy is something that is rhetorically and materially practiced. Additionally, I
argue that privacy—along with its counterpart publicity—is something that is argued about and
needs to be argued about. My focus in this project is on *social* aspects of privacy, rather than
*institutional* aspects of privacy. Put differently, I am interested in how users of social media sites
practice and understand their privacy in regards to social relations, rather than how their privacy
might relate to institutions like corporations and the government. While certain institutional
forces are certainly a cause of great concern for privacy—the buying and selling of data, the U.S.
PATRIOT Act, the current threats to women’s bodily and decisional privacy through attempts to
limit their reproductive freedom, and subpoenas for companies like Twitter and Facebook to hand
over data in court cases—I bracket these institutional concerns in order to focus on social aspects of privacy in everyday life. This is not to say that social and institutional privacy are not highly interrelated—after all, it is only possible to use sites like Facebook because users provide so much information that advertisements can be targeted to specific users based on interests. But a focus on social aspects of privacy online enables scholars and teachers in rhetoric and writing to consider the social dynamics involved in reading and writing in social media environments.

Popular discourses tend to focus on protecting privacy online, or on people’s lack of ability or attention to privacy in new media environments. As Browlee puts it, we need a “wake up call about privacy” online. Randall Stross, in his 2009 *New York Times* business column, writes that “the popularity of Facebook and other social networking sites has promoted the sharing of all things personal” to the point that “disclosure becomes the norm and privacy becomes a quaint anachronism.” But privacy is not an anachronism online, or “dead” as many would claim, but is instead managed in relationship to publicity. Users of social media sites may share more private information and activities than before, but that sharing is always in tension with their own desires for privacy. Sharing information is never completely giving up one’s privacy—it is the situated and rhetorical negotiation of visibility and withdrawal, disclosure and reticence (see Blatterer). A rhetorical approach, then, helps to situate how users share information and manage their privacy in digital environments by attending to the situatedness of an encounter with an interface. In other words, a rhetorical approach to privacy practices places privacy practices in context.

Privacy is, admittedly, difficult to define. As Daniel Solove, one of the most eminent legal scholars on privacy, explains, “privacy is a sweeping concept, encompassing (among other things) freedom of thought, control over one’s body, solitude in one’s home, control over personal information, freedom from surveillance, protection of one’s reputation, and protection from searches and interrogation” (*Understanding Privacy* 1). Because the concept is in
“disarray,” as Solove puts it, it becomes difficult to articulate privacy problems, often “lack[ing] a compelling account of what is at stake when privacy is threatened” (2). Additionally, without a compelling and thorough understanding of privacy, it becomes difficult to understand privacy as a set of practices, leading large cultural shifts in privacy practices to appear improper, ill conceived, or foolish. Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century, popular discourses were quick to blame youth for their indiscretions online, claiming blankly that they were sharing everything. Privacy is often understood in a limited sense as an individual property, as a right, which also leads these discourses to be concerned that we should protect privacy and that digital media are threats to privacy.

Because privacy can encompass so much more than simply protecting privacy or giving up information online, I draw on Solove, Judith Wagner DeCew, and Helen Nissenbaum in articulating privacy as a cluster concept that involves information privacy, spatial and bodily privacy, and expressive privacy, or the ability to express oneself and develop one’s identity (DeCew 75-77). Understanding the concept in this way helps to investigate the various aspects of privacy as it is understood and practiced in digital media environments. For example, from a rhetorical perspective, we can see how Girls Around Me might be problematic because not only does it involve informational privacy (users have provided information to Foursquare and Facebook that they have made publicly available), but it also involves spatial privacy: Users of Girls Around Me now have access to Facebook profiles (which can be understood as an extension of the self) and the ability to make unwanted advances by sending Facebook messages. Further, a user of Girls Around Me can violate a woman’s anonymity in a public space by going to the bar, restaurant, or club she is at.

A knee-jerk reaction to Girls Around Me would respond that Facebook and Foursquare users clearly don’t understand privacy on these sites and have foolishly, ignorantly, or lazily made their profiles public. Discourses of control and protection abound when it comes to digital
privacy, and digital users are often to blame for not protecting their own privacy. This blame extends particularly to girls and women. In his blog post on Girls Around Me, Brownlee explained that the women featured in the app had “neglected” to make their Facebook profiles private “out of ignorance, apathy, or laziness.” When Boston resident and self-described “health social media nerd” Marie Connelly discovered she was featured in the Girls Around Me image on Brownlee’s post, she critiqued him for his blaming rhetoric, defending her choice to make her accounts public. She explained that she benefited from the social connections she had gained because of those decisions, and articulated a cogent critique of the rhetoric of risk and blame so ubiquitously used in privacy discussions:

I don’t believe that having a public persona online needs to be a risky enterprise, and it seems like plenty of people are able to manage that without being attacked, stalked, or otherwise targeted. If we’re saying that’s only true for one half of the population, then I don’t think this is really a conversation about internet privacy as much as it’s a conversation about whether it’s safe to be a woman and live in public. (Connelly)

Importantly, discourses and practices related to privacy are gendered (as well as raced, classed, sexualized, and marked by different cultural norms and power differences), making the social and political aspects of privacy incredibly important to explore.

Why should rhetorical scholars care about privacy practices in digital environments? As more and more of us are online, using social media, how we manage privacy and relate to each other in these environments becomes increasingly important. As our students are probably the most frequent users of these sites, and as we ask students to engage in public rhetoric online, it is important to consider various understandings and practices related to privacy in digital environments. I take this stance because privacy is not just an individual good, but rather a public good, in that it helps to facilitate autonomy and sociability in a variety of ways. As numerous
privacy scholars have argued, privacy is important for creating social distance, for developing autonomy and performing identities, and for allowing for intimacy because people can determine what to share with whom (see Moore; Nagel; Murphy; Fried; Gerstein). Without strong understandings of privacy, both as a set of norms and as a descriptor of behaviors, it becomes hard to determine what is good for helping to facilitate identity development and performance online, how people build relations online, and what is useful for healthy public discourse. Privacy is important for identity construction, developing intimacy, and creating sociability.

Privacy is arguably in a moment of “crisis” in the public imagination. Perhaps more accurately, we might say that privacy is one of the topoi that citizens turn to, or one of the commonplaces they rely on, in order to represent and understand new technologies and their place in social relations. Rick Altman argues that when a new technology is created and adapted, “we find a crisis of identity, reflected in every aspect of the new technology’s socially defined existence” (19). Altman calls for a “crisis historiography” that understands that new media are not simply composed of their technological components, but are instead defined in historically and socially contingent ways, “depend[ing] on the way users develop and understand them” (16). This does not mean that the technological components of new media are not deeply infused with social values (Winner); rather, how new media are discussed reveal and influence our understanding and anxieties around them.

By exploring practices and interfaces in addition to popular discourses, I follow two recent turns in rhetorical studies developed over the last decade. The first, an ecological approach to rhetoric, revises the long-held model of rhetor-message-audience for rhetorical action, instead understanding rhetoric as the situated, embodied engagement of a rhetor in an environment. Marilyn Cooper, Sid Dobrin, Jenny Edbauer, Barbara Warnick, and Collin Brooke have been influential to my understanding of rhetorical action as the use of words and tools to engage with our environments (Cooper, “Linked to the Matrix” 17, 29). Cooper is clear that “ecology” is not
just a new way to say “context”: context has typically be understood as static and unchanging, something that a rhetor can fully comprehend or assess. Ecological approaches to rhetoric understand that environments are constantly changing and never static (“The Ecology of Writing” 368). This certainly applies to digital environments: Not only do services like Facebook often upgrade their features, but because users approach them for different purposes and at different moments in time, when others on the network are interacting in various ways, the interface is always under constant revision. Thus, we cannot analyze interfaces like we do texts. As Collin Brooke argues, turning to the interface for analysis means taking into account perspectives and practices of users (132).

The second strand of rhetorical scholarship that informs my approach here is the turn to rhetorics of everyday life. Following scholars like Ralph Cintron, Martin Nystrand, John Duffy, and John Ackerman, I attend to “the rhetorical character and dynamics of language in mundane contexts” and “the ways that individuals and groups use language to constitute their social realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings” (Nystrand and Duffy viii, ix). That is, I am concerned with the everyday use of language (and images) by users in their practices on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare and on various devices—their desktop or laptop computers, their cell phones for texting, their webcams for sharing video, their smart phones for network capability—in various places and contexts. How do users approach these sites, services, and devices and practice privacy in these environments? What does this mean for their social relationships?

One key argument of this dissertation is that managing one’s privacy in social media environments constitutes a highly literate set of activities. Calling managing one’s privacy online a “literacy” does not mean I advocate an ideal set of practices with certain levels of disclosure, visibility, reticence, and privacy online. A central problem with the term *literacy* is the historical weight it carries as a tool for enforcing proper behavior and privileged Western values (see
Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola). Instead, I follow literacy scholars over the last 30 years who have argued that literacy is contextual and social, not a simply the autonomous, mechanical encoding of symbols, but the use of language to engage in social situations embedded within cultural practices (e.g., Street 2; Grabill 24; Yagelski 9-10). Duffy extends this perspective by arguing that literacy practices are not just social, but rhetorical: Among other aspects, literacy practices and education help to shape the world, “promot[ing] a vision of the world and the place of learners within it,” both constraining human freedoms and offering possibilities for change as social action (“Other Gods” 43; see also “Letters to a Fair City”). To argue that managing privacy online requires a highly literate set of activities, then, is to argue that managing privacy in digital settings is rhetorical, the use of symbols to engage in an environment.

The literacy practices and activities needed to manage privacy online are perhaps most exemplified in Facebook’s interface for its privacy settings. In 2010, the New York Times reported in a dense infographic that a user would need to navigate 50 settings with 170 options in order to manage their privacy settings on Facebook (Gates). In a flow chart, the infographic shows how users would need to navigate to various different pages within Facebook in order to adjust these settings. Separate pages are available for contact settings, ads, personal information, search settings, and third-party applications. Users also need to navigate to individual photo albums in order to adjust their privacy settings for those. This infographic reveals the complexities of being able to manage one’s privacy—among other users, from non-users, and for third party apps—on one single web site. Though now dated (Facebook has since updated its interface for managing privacy), the infographic reveals the complex reading and writing activities involved in managing privacy, especially for a long-time user who might want to change various settings: A user could spend hours navigating multiple pages in order to change the privacy settings for each photo album, create lists of friends who have limited access to posts, select who can have access to contact information, and so forth. A colleague of mine, for instance, spent hours teaching herself
how to navigate these pages and change her settings after she discovered her students could see publicly available images of her family through Google searches. And another, frustrated with how much time it would take to change his privacy settings for various social groups on Facebook, expressed that it might be easiest to just delete his account and start over. No wonder, then, that researchers have found that users were confused by Facebook’s settings and were often either sharing or hiding personal information in ways they hadn’t intended (Madejski, Johnson, and Bellovin).

Because privacy is both discussed in popular discourses and practiced in digital environments, I approach privacy and digital media through three methods: I explore how privacy and digital technologies are discussed in both public and disciplinary discourses, including newspapers, magazines, technology blogs, and scholarly approaches; how certain technological interfaces afford and make possible, as well as limit and shape, certain behaviors and conceptions of privacy; and how privacy is practiced by social media users in specific contexts and ecologies.

In order to explore the dynamics of privacy in digital environments, I turn to four sets of rhetorical practices in the body of this dissertation. Each of these sets of practices has caught public attention in some way, through moral panics or what Reynolds calls a “discourse of crisis” (Geographies 24). In chapter 2, I explore the uses of mobile devices in public spaces, which have often been responded to by a discourse of crisis that claims public spaces are dying and that users have lost a sense of place as they traverse digital elsewheres. Turning to these practices and the discourses about them affords me the opportunity to explore the materiality of privacy and how people use devices in their rhetorical ecologies in order to manage their availability—to create private spheres or to build relations with others.

In chapter 3, I turn to the case of Tyler Clementi, the gay Rutgers undergraduate who committed suicide in 2008. The case gained national attention because his roommate, Dharun Ravi, had spied on him using a webcam the same week as Clementi’s suicide, and the situation
became a national story about invaded privacy and the dangers of cyberbullying. Attending to the various discourses before Ravi and Clementi met, during Ravi’s spying, and after Clementi’s suicide allows me to explore how identity is changing online, particularly through the digital traces left by posting private information online. Identity online becomes a matter of researching and building a digital identity about others based on searches for the various digital evidence provided online.

I then turn to the moral panic around “sexting,” the sending of sexually suggestive or explicit images, videos, and texts via mobile phones, in Chapter 4, exploring how the “public pedagogy” (Giroux, Abandoned Generation 38) of sexting is gendered, disproportionately blaming girls and young women for sending a sext. Rhetorics of protection serve to blame victims, particularly girls and women, for making themselves vulnerable, or attempting mediated intimacy through digital environments, instead of focusing on the ethics of sharing others’ private photos or videos.

In Chapter 5, I turn to sociability by exploring the 2009 Sundance award winning documentary We Live in Public, a film that chronicles the rise and fall of 1990s dot com millionaire Josh Harris and his experiments on surveillance, privacy, and digital media. This film and Harris’s experiments are understood as a “warning shot” by producer Ondi Timoner and by reviewers for the dangers of lost privacy in social media settings. In this chapter I argue that Harris’s experiments and the film ignore how bodies are actually practiced in social media environments. In fact, most claims about sociability on social networking sites tend to ignore actual, situated practices, and I conclude by calling for attending to the situated, embodied engagements with environments in order to explore sociability online.

This dissertation focuses on four concepts related to privacy through analyses of discourses, interfaces, and practices related to social media environments: materiality (Chapter 2), identity (Chapter 3), intimacy (Chapter 4), and sociability (Chapter 5). These four concepts are
intricately related to privacy and are central to a comprehensive understanding of the importance of privacy to rhetoric because they reveal how privacy is a central aspect of how we live our lives, online and off. While I use these concepts to frame discussions in each chapter, making analytic distinctions among the terms, I stress that they are intricately tied to each other and coalesce to encompass many aspects of the complex and dynamic ways that privacy functions.

Throughout this dissertation, I call attention to the materiality of privacy—that is, how it is not just about information, but is an embodied practice in relation to space and place. Rhetorical scholars have recently turned to the material and bodies, including rhetorical understandings of spaces and geographies (e.g., Reynolds, *Geographies*; Ackerman; Dickinson), the materiality of writing (e.g., Haas, *Writing Technology*), the involvement of bodies in aesthetic engagements with texts (e.g., Wysocki), and the connections between rhetorical education and bodily training (e.g., Hawhee, “Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life”). Among those scholars, Nedra Reynolds and Christina Haas both explain that privacy is a material practice (as I will discuss later in this chapter). A focus on information privacy and digital communication can often lead to ignoring how privacy is materially practiced—not just a disembodied engagement with a screen that takes us away from our bodies and the places we are residing in, but rather a fully engaged, embodied experience and interaction with both screens and physical environments. Indeed, as I explore in chapters 2 and 5, bodies as they are practiced are often ignored, even by those who claim, as literary critic Zadie Smith does, that we are losing a sense of our bodies as we reduce our identities to data online. This sort of view relies on a belief that bodies are experienced, but we need to understand bodies as things we practice.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the three terms central to this project: social media, privacy, and rhetoric. I define social media as the type of digital media that encourages many-to-many communication, in contrast to personal one-to-one media and broadcast, or one-to-many communication. Importantly, social media have certain technological affordances that allow for
shifts in privacy practices in contrast to privacy in spaces or in print: Information is easily aggregated, is recorded (perhaps indefinitely), is easily replicated and searched, and can thus easily reach more people. Additionally, the technological features that Nissenbaum explains make threats to privacy easier in digital environments: the monitoring and tracking, aggregation and analysis, and dissemination and publication of data (20). From there, I turn to disciplinary understandings of privacy, exploring how rhetorical scholars have approached privacy in previous scholarship before advancing a notion of privacy as a cluster concept. I then discuss what I mean by rhetorical ecologies, drawing on a growing body of scholarship that understand rhetorical action as an embodied engagement with one’s environment.

In the remainder of the chapter I begin to develop my argument about the social and rhetorical dimensions of privacy by explaining the four ways in which privacy is rhetorical—the term frames debates, it is used as a commonplace in order to make arguments, privacy is a set of practices in environments, and environments encourage certain understandings and practices of privacy. I then turn to Facebook, perhaps the paradigmatic social media site, in order to explore one way in which privacy is increasingly social online: While discourses about privacy, including Facebook’s privacy policy, stress control over information, control over access to information is actually distributed throughout one’s online social network. That is, others’ privacy settings and practices help to determine how accessible your expressions and information are online. Because Facebook is so immensely popular and because privacy policies on the site have changed so many times since its beginning in February 2004, the site has been the focus of much mass media attention over the last decade or so. I turn to these popular discourses, exploring three strands that will recur in my analyses throughout this project: nostalgia for face-to-face communication, a moral crisis about youth’s anti-social activities, and the coordination of this moral crisis with a literacy crisis.
“Social Media” and Technological Features that Affect Privacy Practices

The term *social media* is often used to describe a wide variety of digital media, most often in contrast to broadcast media (e.g., books, newspaper, radio, film, television shows) and one-to-one communication (e.g., letters, telegraphs, telephone conversations). The term is admittedly misleading, as all media are social in that they mediate relationships between and among people. In many ways, the term *social media*, like its associated term *social networking site*, is used without a clear definition. I define *social media* loosely and broadly as *digital media that encourage through their designs the practices of many-to-many communication*. That is, social media is characterized not by broadcasting from one source to a mass audience, or by one-to-one communication, but by the possibility of many communicating to many in a digital environment. A good example is Twitter, a service that allows users to post messages, or “tweets” of 140 characters or less. While in a sense users broadcast these tweets to their followers, it is more accurate to say this is an environment for many-to-many communication. A user’s tweets are embedded in a stream of tweets from many users (those he or she follows), making an environment where reading and writing occur concurrently: As I post to Twitter I am also reading communication from my followers.

In this dissertation, then, I use the term *social media* out of rhetorical convenience because it is a recognized term deployed in popular and scholarly discourses to describe the types of digital media I am concerned with in this project. Social media holds an uncomfortable place in many people’s imagination, as it disturbs the previous dichotomy between broadcast and personal communication. Clay Shirky notes that the distinction between broadcast and personal communication blurs with social media and leads to confusion about the nature of messages: “since we’re so unused to communications media and broadcast media being mixed together, we think everyone is now broadcast” (87). However, social media users are often not broadcasting an
impersonal message, but also might not be sending personal one-to-one communications; instead, social media calls into question an old assumption about media: that we can tell the distinction between a personal and an impersonal message simply by the type of medium in use (87). Social media, then, are defined by the ways in which they encourage many-to-many communications that may be personal or impersonal (or both, sometimes at the same time). Because readers may be unfamiliar with many aspects of social media, here I’ll describe social media, provide some examples, and discuss some of the technological features that are important to issues of privacy on these sites and services.

Social media is often defined by certain characteristics that distinguish them from other digital media. Though they use the term “social network sites” instead of “social media,” Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison’s definition is useful in describing some typical characteristics of social media.¹ They explain that social networking sites “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison). Importantly, the structure of those profiles, connections, and ways for traversing the system can vary widely from one social media service to another. Thus, a wide variety of services or websites can count as social media:

- Social networking sites, like MySpace, Facebook, Google Plus, and Friendster, which allow users to create a profile and to connect their profile to other users through creating lists of “friends” (which are mutual connections). Some social networking sites, such as Facebook and Google Plus, include a homepage that aggregates updates from your

¹ Boyd and Ellison use “social network site” instead of “social networking site” because they feel that “networking” mischaracterizes these sites as the word “emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers,” whereas many social media sites are used among already established social circles.
friends into one page, and most include features that allow for private messages between users or in groups.

- Location-based services, such as Foursquare and Gowalla, which include user profiles and lists of mutual friends. These sites are generally used to “check in” at a location, involve rewards (often “points”) for checking in, and allow users to see where their friends are located if they’ve checked into a place.

- Blogging services, like Blogger, LiveJournal, and Xanga (now defunct), which allow users to keep a blog and develop lists of either friends or blogs they follow.

- Microblogging services, like Twitter and Tumblr, which are similar to blogging services except that posts are typically shorter and features are usually included for replying to content (instead of leaving a comment on a blog post) and reposting others’ content.

- Sites for sharing and discussing specific types of media that users are consuming, like Goodreads (for sharing book reviews) and Last.fm (for sharing what you’re listening to), which typically include profiles, lists of books or musicians that users like, and the ability to follow or friend other users and comment on their reviewers or profiles.

- Online dating services, like OKCupid, Skout, and Grindr, which can be used for meeting romantic partners or for casual sexual encounters. These sites or mobile phone apps allow users to create profiles, search through others’ profiles, and send private messages. Some allow for uploading various content (particularly photos) that other users can comment on, and many offer the option to mark other users as friends.

- Photo-sharing services, like Flickr, Instagram, and Twitpic, which provide a platform for users to share photos, either publicly or with those who follow them or are friends. While some of these services can be used on their own, others were created to be integrated into other services. Twitpic, for instance, requires a Twitter account and creates a tweet (140-character missive) that describes and links to the picture a user posts.
• Video-sharing sites, like YouTube and Justin.tv, where users upload videos, have profiles and channels (that list all their videos), create lists of friends or channels to follow, and comment on videos. Some, like Justin.tv, include the option to broadcast live with simultaneous chat features, while others, like YouTube, require pre-recorded videos to be uploaded.

What these sites and services generally share is the ability to create profiles, build a network, and traverse through others’ profiles and content. Increasingly, these sites can be accessed from both computers and mobile phones that have network connectivity, as many of these services have mobile apps. Additionally, many of these services allow integration, meaning that content can be optionally or automatically loaded from one site onto another. For example, Instagram, a photo sharing service that allows users to upload and alter photos by applying a filter, has the option to also post the photo to Facebook and Twitter. This integration is possible because of APIs, which allow developers to use the code of a service to connect two services (which is what made the iPhone app Girls Around Me also possible), and because of how micro-content is coded, allowing for videos or images to be easily embedded in other sites using HTML code (and increasingly, by clicking links like “post” or “share”).

Digital technology on these sites allow for content to be more visible, more easily shared, and more easily searched, affordances that affect shifts in privacy practices online. Danah Boyd explains that social media sites have four features that affect sociability: 1) the persistence of data and expressions, in that communication on these sites is recorded and archived; 2) the replicability of content, meaning that content is easily duplicated and posted elsewhere within a service or between services; 3) the scalability of content, meaning that the visibility of a user’s content and network is great and that content can easily reach a broad audience; and 4) the searchability of content, which allows users to search and find profiles and content quite easily (“Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” 45-48). Importantly, these features allow for
invisible and convergent audiences, meaning that content might be available on some of these sites to audiences without the awareness of the individual poster. This aspect of convergent and invisible audiences is particularly true for sites that allow for more visibility, or for sites where users’ various social lives converge (for instance, on Facebook, where many people friend family members, friends, acquaintances, and co-workers).

These affordances and the structures of social media are spreading to other digital media that in the past worked more like one-to-one communication. For instance, chat clients are increasingly functioning like social media, allowing for group chats instead of individual conversations between two users. While some chat clients have always allowed for multi-user chats—ICQ, the first chat client available Internet wide, provided this feature—the feature is increasingly common and being developed for chat clients that previously did not have this feature. Google’s chat feature, integrated into its email system and its social networking site Google+, now allows for multi-user text chat and video chat. Another digital media, Short Message Services (SMS) on cell phones, commonly referred to as texting, is becoming increasingly like social media. Whereas a mass text could be sent from mobile phones in the past, Apple’s iPhone now has a feature that allows users to reply all when they are mass texted. Increasingly, the abilities for groups to communicate with each other is becoming easier as many-to-many communications are becoming easier in digital environments.

Helen Nissenbaum offers a different schema for approaching privacy concerns in digital environments, one that focuses on the technological functions that make threats to privacy more possible than it might be in physical spaces. Facebook serves as a paradigmatic social media site, as it is currently the largest service, with over 845 million active users as of December 31, 2011 (“Fact Sheet”) and draws more web traffic in the United States than either Google’s or Yahoo’s services (“Facebook Inches”). Additionally, it has drawn the most media attention over the last few years for privacy concerns online. Facebook is exemplary for its uses of technological
features that allow for the sorts of challenges to traditional understandings of privacy. Three technological functions, as Helen Nissenbaum outlines them, converge in Facebook in ways that afford threats to privacy:

1) **Monitoring and tracking** online involves the automated collection of data through a variety of mechanisms and for a variety of possible purposes—for example, surveillance for control, data collection for marketing. Whereas in offline situations monitoring and tracking requires much material and invasive technologies, online it can be automated to the point that “Every interaction is like the credit card purchase,” including IP addresses, clicks on links, cookies, and more (Nissenbaum 28, chapter 1). Facebook and other social networking sites use monitoring and tracking in order to direct advertisements to users and to understand their user base in order to make the platform more user-friendly or to develop new features for the site. Additionally, Facebook’s interface makes it easier for users to monitor and track each other; for example, users “Facebook stalk” each other in order to learn more about new acquaintances or potential dating partners (Raynes-Goldie).

2) **Aggregation and analysis** refers to the ability to store, retrieve, organize, and analyze information quickly and easily. This ability is made possible by recent technological developments in cheap computer memory, faster processing power, networked computers that allow for fast and easy transfer of information, and analytic developments in information science (Nissenbaum, chapter 2). These developments, which are implemented on Facebook, allow for the aggregation and analysis of data in a multitude of ways, so that advertising can be directed at users, friends can be suggested, and the News Feed can deliver updates on Facebook’s homepage. Users also make use of aggregation, finding new friends more easily, creating friends lists, making use of the News Feed, and more.
3) Dissemination and publication speaks to ease in the ability to post and spread information, especially online (Nissenbaum, chapter 3). This can be as simple as the ability to quickly post a Facebook status update, to write on a wall, or to post pictures, but also speaks to the ease in replicating and disseminating information: clicking the “share” button on Facebook, the ability for videos to go viral, for information to be shared and quickly be posted on various pages, sites, and forums. Facebook is paradigmatic of the technological ability to quickly post, publish, and spread information.

These categories are not meant to be discrete; in reality, they often overlap. For instance, the aggregation of data also allows for ease in tracking and monitoring of others, as information can be aggregated into one more accessible place (such as a user’s Facebook wall). But for analytic purposes, the categories are helpful in understanding how the technologies that make Facebook possible also make threats and violations to traditional understandings of privacy more possible.

Disciplinary Views of Privacy: Five Strands

While various scholars in rhetoric and composition have examined privacy issues, their approaches have typically, with a few exceptions, been ancillary to larger studies, or have discussed privacy in rather limited ways. In the field, privacy is generally discussed in one of five ways: 1) The first way rhetorical scholarship has discussed privacy is as a material practice in relation to place or space. This strand of scholarship sees the public/private distinction as embedded in how we understand place and space and influential to material practices. (Reynolds, Geographies; Haas, “Materializing”). 2) A second strand of scholarship understands the public/private distinction as a dichotomy that shifts with the development of new media. Scholars in this area explore how the ways that people have historically and currently discussed and used new communication technologies have shifted understandings and practices of the public/private
distinction (Baron; Miller and Shepherd; Marvin; Stubbs; Blake). 3) A third group of scholars understands privacy as an aspect of ethics that needs to be respected and protected. While these scholars also understand privacy as a shifting and contextual notion, they largely focus on how activists argue for protecting their privacy online, how researchers need to respect others’ notions of privacy, and how a strong critical literacy online involves protecting one’s privacy online (McKee and Porter; Markel; Gurak, *Persuasion and Privacy, Cyberliteracy*). 4) In another approach, feminists in rhetorical studies have explored the historical and current gendered nature of the public/private dichotomy, understanding privacy as feminized: it has long meant the domestic and the personal, and has thus been undervalued in rhetorical scholarship. Feminist rhetorical scholars have argued that the public/private distinction needs to be disrupted or re-imagined in order to revalue the rhetorical contributions of women (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford; Glenn). 5) Finally, rhetoric and composition scholars have approach privacy and the private as a threat to public rhetoric: Private lives expressed in public can lead to the validation of private, authentic identities rather than and opportunity to change identities and discuss public issues (Couture; Dobrin, “Going Public”). These five strands of rhetorical scholarship contribute to a rather dynamic understanding of privacy in relation to rhetoric.

The first strand of rhetorical scholarship that addresses privacy explores how it relates to material practices and conceptions of space and place. Christina Haas and Nedra Reynolds have perhaps been most influential in helping rhetorical studies understand the public/private dichotomy; they see it as influential to material practices, particularly in relationship to place and space. Haas’s study of the material representations of the public/private dichotomy in a court injunction at an abortion clinic in Ohio reveals how the public/private distinction is often invoked and discussed in spatial terms, making the delineation “a kind of material practice” (“Materializing” 232). Her analysis of how “public” is described in terms of the metaphor of “place” by Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the
specific injunction she studies reveals how privacy becomes understood in spatial terms, as a material space not to be violated. For example, Haas shows how the Supreme Court has increasingly spatialized privacy, defending it in terms of a “zone or privacy” that is protected from government “intrusion” (230-231). Reynolds’s study of reactions to cell phone uses in Geographies of Writing contributes similarly to the material understanding of the public/private distinction. Reynolds argues that cell phone use in public confuses people’s notions of public and private because of our material understanding of certain places and spaces as being public or private. She explains, “It is not the technology that is the culprit but ideas about space that cause the attitudes toward cell phone use” (22).

While Haas and Reynolds focus on the materiality of privacy, a second strand of rhetorical scholarship focuses more on conceptions of privacy and the shifting notions of the public/privacy distinction in relationship to developing new media. These studies contribute to an understanding that shifting notions of privacy are hardly anything new, but that notions of privacy shift in specific historical contexts, not solely because of new technologies, but because of how these technologies are used, discussed, and understood. In his broad-sweeping study of the adoption of new communication technologies, Dennis Baron makes the point that “each new communication technology remixes our notions of public and private, bringing the public world into previously private space and exposing the private to public scrutiny” (xv). That is, new communication technologies disrupt boundaries between public and private, sometimes by making private lives more accessible to others, or by making public communication more available in private spaces. Carolyn Marvin, Katherine Stubbs, and Erin C. Blake all contribute to this understanding of shifting notions of publicity and privacy through analyses of historical developments of new media. Blake’s analysis of the uses of the zograscope reveals how it allowed for the enjoyment of public space within the private sphere of the home in eighteenth-century England (20), and Stubbs’s analysis of literature about the telegraph in the nineteenth
century shows anxieties about women’s increased publicity and visibility as telegraph operators (98-100). Marvin’s thorough analysis of the dramas around the adoption of telephones and electricity reveals how these new technologies challenged the boundaries between public and private knowledge, allowing for the exposing of family secrets (64, 68), but also how these technologies were domesticated in order to protect the intimate sphere of domestic life (76-80). More recently, Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd explore how blogs blur the distinctions between privacy and publicity, as they argue that blogs are a genre that allow for the validation of a private self in public. These historical and contemporary studies assist us in understanding how communication technologies and their uses affect conceptions and practices of the public/private distinction in situated ways.

The third stand of rhetorical scholarship that addresses privacy explores it in terms of ethics: as something that should be respected or protected. These studies often understand that privacy can be understood differently by different people or in different contexts, but often approach privacy as something that activists seek to protect, that students need to protect from companies online, and that researchers need to respect. Laura J. Gurak’s 1997 study of online activism protesting the development of the Lotus Marketplace and Clipper chips and their invasion of privacy explores how online activists were interested in protecting their privacy. While her study contributes greatly to understanding the rhetorical features of community ethos and delivery online (Persuasion and Privacy 5) and she admits to the vague and complicated nature of the term privacy (46), Gurak understands privacy largely as something to be protected. Her later project on cyberliteracy also focuses on privacy as something to be protected: teaching online literacy, she argues, can help “Internet users to question the privacy issue: to reject sites that don’t have clear privacy policies and to lobby their representatives for more comprehensive approaches to privacy and technology” (Cyberliteracy 12). In a chapter on “Privacy and Copyright in Digital Space,” Gurak focuses on protecting privacy from data collection through
cookies and being aware of laws and critical of laissez-faire economic models that give companies a lot of freedom to use information they have collected (110-127). Similarly, in his analysis of websites’ privacy statements, Mike Markel shows how many websites obfuscate their privacy policies and are unethical according to a rights model of ethics. In perhaps the richest exploration of privacy, Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter’s *The Ethics of Internet Research* explores how notions of privacy are culturally specific and that those notions may lead to researchers having different expectations of privacy than those they are studying (46). They urge readers to not let Internal Review Board procedures and perspectives cloud the ethical conundrums of differing notions of privacy online (41). Their rich discussion is useful in problematizing notions of “published” as “public” (77), but like other studies on privacy, their book focuses solely on privacy as something that should be respected or protected.

The fourth strand of rhetorical scholarship that addresses privacy comes from feminists who question and attempt to disrupt the gendered aspects of the public/private distinction. Feminists have long questioned the gendered nature of the terms *public* and *private*, which have historically equated public with the rational, the market, and politics (and thus masculine), and private with the emotional and domestic (and thus feminine). In their exploration of how feminism and rhetoric intersect and transform each other, Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford discuss how the public/private distinction becomes a double-bind for women seeking transformative, feminist change: In order to gain ethos, feminists must adhere to stylistic standards of Western academic prose, which devalues the personal; but in order to effect change, a turn to the personal is important (423-424). Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford also explore how women have been excluded from public venues and how more private means of delivery have been devalued in the field. In the words of Barbara Biesecker, “Rhetoric is a discipline whose distinctive characteristic is its focus on public address, a realm to which women as a class have historically been denied access” (qtd. in Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 430). Glenn makes the
historical nature of the public/private dichotomy and its affect on rhetorical studies clear in her book *Rhetoric Retold*. In order to explain an aspect of the reasons women have been excluded from the rhetorical tradition, Glenn outlines the ancient Greek dichotomy of the *idios*, or the private realm that included the *oikos*, the domestic sphere, and the *polis*, the public realm of rhetoric (1). According to Glenn, women have been silenced and made invisible within the rhetorical tradition in part because of the field’s (masculine) value in the public and because the *idios* remains “seldom-examined” (1). This feminist strand of rhetorical scholarship explores how the public/private dichotomy is gendered and related to power: the exclusion of women from public discourse and the devaluing of private discourses (like letter writing and translation).

The fifth strand of rhetorical scholarship that addresses privacy approaches private discourse as the type of discourse that is harmful to public discourse because the sharing of private lives in public causes us to focus on identities, promoting self-authenticity, rather than on issues and the possibility for changing identities. In her introductory chapter to *The Private, the Public, and the Published: Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric*, Barbara Couture argues that the “increased fusing of the private and public does not bode well for public rhetoric; it does not lead to expression that contributes to the public good,” and in fact “obliterates the possibility of public rhetoric” because we don’t relate to each other in ways that are productive for changing ideas and identities (2-3). As Couture explains, the impetus to share private lives in public and the conflation of private and public causes very real problems for identification and communication, demanding “that the audience absorb, deny, refuse or obliterate difference” (4). Put differently, the sharing of private identities in public changes the nature of rhetoric in public: Instead of developing “some shared understanding of what it is to be human,” rhetors instead focus on identities (4). And that focus on identities does not allow for debate about identity; public rhetoric needs to be a place where identities are “challenged, changed, and expanded by virtue of contact with others in a public forum” (8). In another approach, Sid Dobrin argues that
writing assignments that ask students to express their feelings as private feelings is “abhorrent.” It is disempowering for students because they need the opportunity “to make decisions about their public discourse participation,” not express their feelings as private in ways that reinforce self-authenticity (“Going Public” 229). Dobrin isn’t against self-expression; rather, he is against the sort of sharing of private lives that doesn’t place those private moments in relation to public discourse—that is, the sharing of private lives in public that serves as therapy or reinforces the notions of “students’ own true self” (226).

In my review of these five strands, I am not claiming that there is anything necessarily wrong with any of these approaches. In fact, I find them useful as rhetorical studies begins to contemplate the rhetorical nature of privacy, especially in relationship to new media technologies. These scholars have begun to develop an understanding of the material and social dimensions of privacy and stress the very real and important necessities to respect and protect privacy as an ethical imperative for researchers and users of technologies. What I would contend, though, is that studies of privacy in rhetoric have not yet investigated fully the rich and complex nature of privacy, especially its social complexities in social media environments and practices in these environments.

What is Privacy in a Digital Age? A Cluster Concept of Privacy and Common Misconceptions

Privacy has become such a concern in digital settings and yet many are unsure what to do about it. Various commentators have been concerned that privacy is in fact dead online. In their response to Mark Zuckerberg’s explanation of privacy changes on Facebook in 2010, the blog ReadWriteWeb hyperbolized his claims about the changing nature of privacy, paraphrasing him inaccurately in a post titled “Facebook’s Zuckerberg Says The Age of Privacy is Over” (M.
Kirkpatrick). Michael Arrington on *TechCrunch* has argued that people shouldn’t be concerned about privacy on Facebook: They like Facebook, and, well, “The fact is that privacy is already really, really dead” because individuals have already given up so much information to corporations. Others have also chimed in that privacy is now dead (see, for example, Garfinkel; see also Solove, “Speech, Privacy, and Reputation on the Internet” 20-21, for further critiques of this claim). In her analysis of terms of service documents for virtual worlds, online games, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Debra Halbert argues that “in virtual worlds, there is by definition no privacy” and that the term is “an antiquated concept” in these spaces.

What exactly is privacy, and can it still exist online? Those who claim that privacy is dead or antiquated mistake changing practices in relationship to privacy for privacy’s end, and while technological changes and uses of technologies have certainly made protecting privacy more difficult, “It is still possible to protect privacy, but doing so requires we rethink outdated understandings of the concept,” in the words of Daniel Solove (“Speech” 20). I follow Solove, Judith Wagner DeCew, and Helen Nissenbaum in understanding privacy as a “a broad and multifaceted cluster concept” (DeCew 61) that involves control over accessibility to and the flow of information, access to one’s body and personal spaces, the ability to express oneself for identity development—all for “relief from a range of kinds of social friction” (Solove, “A Taxonomy” 484). As Solove explains, privacy isn’t a coherent concept, but is rather more a Wittgensteinian term: a cluster of concepts that share resemblances with each other (*Understanding Privacy* 42-44). It is important to keep in mind that any specific content is not automatically or a priori considered private. Instead, it is determined to be private in specific contexts and depending on one’s perspective. For instance, a Facebook wall post may be private in the context of a parent-child relationship if the parent is not in the child’s network but is not private to the rest of the child’s social network. Privacy, then, is a social and contextual concept that helps to facilitate identity formation and relationships with others.
Privacy has a contextual quality that is understood and practiced differently in different social, historical, and cultural contexts. For Western culture, privacy and the private have a long intellectual history, including Aristotle’s famous distinction between the *polis*, or the public arena open to all free citizens, and the *oikos*, the private sphere of the home. Liberal tradition that the private life must be protected by the state develops in John Locke’s 1690 *Second Treatise on Government*, where he argued that the state was necessary to protect private ends (see Habermas 3; DeCew 10-11). More recently, the concept of a right to privacy emerged in response to new, developing communication technologies. Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis’s 1890 article “The Right to Privacy” offered the groundwork for incorporating a right to privacy into tort law. Written in response to developing high-speed cameras and the increased circulation of newspapers, Warren and Brandeis argue that these new technologies “have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life” (76). They thus argue for a right to privacy rooted in common law meant to protect “inviolate personality” (82). State tort laws and federal constitutional law followed throughout the twentieth century, often in response to new communication technologies like telephones, polygraph tests, HIV tests, cell phones, and video surveillance (see DeCew, Ch. 1). As Dennis Baron, Carolyn Marvin, Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd, Erin C. Blake, Katherine Stubbs, and various other scholars of communication technologies have shown, new communication technologies often encourage shifts in practices of privacy and publicity, often resulting in anxieties about those shifts.

These shifting practices of privacy point to the need to understand privacy as contextual, as rhetorical. As Lloyd L. Weinreb explains, privacy is contingent on communities, within communities, and on circumstances (42). Nissenbaum offers the concept of *contextual integrity* to help show the contextual nature of privacy: Privacy norms vary from context to context, dependent upon “the types of information in question; the respective roles of the subject, the sender (who may be the subject), and the recipient of this information, and the principles under
which the information is sent or transmitted from the sender to recipient” (127). In many ways, Nissenbaum’s framework of contextual integrity for privacy map onto rhetorical understandings of communication.

Five common conceptions about privacy often get in the way of thinking about privacy as contextual and a cluster concept, especially in online settings: 1) it is often understood in relation to its counterpart publicity, as that which is not public; 2) relatedly, it is often understood in terms of secrecy or undocumented information; 3) it has been understood as the ability to control information about oneself; 4) people focus mostly on information privacy, sometimes at the expense of issues of access to the self or expressive privacy (especially in our information age); and 5) many consider privacy solely in terms of freedom from a Big Brother style surveillance.

**Common Conception #1: Privacy as Not Public**

The public/private distinction often limits our ability to understand privacy in nuanced, contextual, and social ways. As Jeff Weintraub explains, privacy often brings to mind the public/private distinction, which is often understood in terms of either visible versus withdrawn or hidden or collective versus individual. Thus, when people discuss privacy, they often either explicitly or implicitly invoke public, making it seem as though if something is not fully individual, it must be collective, or if something is not fully withdrawn and hidden, it must be visible to all (4-5). These dichotomies are limiting in fully understanding privacy, as they ignore the contextual and nuanced nature of privacy and rely on binaries that might not be useful given a particular context.

Despite objections to the public/private distinction, the dichotomy still holds strong for many considerations of privacy. In his influential article “Privacy, morality, and the law,” W. A. Parent defines privacy as “the condition of not having undocumented personal knowledge about
one possessed by others” (269). He argues that information that is documented in the public record (such as periodicals) cannot be called private, and that invasions of privacy only occur when undocumented information about someone is accessed. Anything that is not both personal and undocumented “cannot without glaring paradox be called private” (271). However, this conception is not sensitive to differing technologies and does not take into account what a society or group decides is documented and considered public (Moore 217-218). Nissenbaum offers the example of Lotus Marketplace: Households, a planned CD-ROM database by Lotus Development Corporation and Equifax, Inc. that would aggregate data for marketers and mail-order companies in the 1990s, to show how documented, public information can still be considered private by individuals. Faced with a public outcry (an estimated 30,000 email complaints), Lotus cancelled the project, but the resistance to the database shows that publicly available information can still be considered private (Nissenbaum 119-120; see Gurak, *Persuasion and Privacy*, for a discussion of Internet activism in this situation). For a more recent example, many people are disturbed to find that Web sites like spokeo.com and pipl.com aggregate publicly available data into one database. These Web sites take publicly available information, such as contact information from public Facebook profiles, and aggregate them into larger databases, making one’s past and present addresses, phone numbers, and family members more accessible. Many find these sites an affront to privacy not because the information isn’t already public, but because it is aggregated into a new place that makes it more easily accessed. In another example, as Maranto and Barton explain, students may see a teacher viewing their Facebook profile, even if it is public, as an invasion of their privacy.
Common Conception #2: Privacy as Secrecy

The common understanding that privacy is secrecy depends on this public/private distinction, and limits a robust understanding of privacy because it depends on this either/or dichotomy. The view that private information must be secret is still pervasive in law. Courts often contend that once information is no longer secret—once it is accessible to others—it is no longer considered private. This view fails to take into consideration access to information, especially how information can be aggregated easily and made differently accessible to more people (Solove, “A Taxonomy” 505-511). However, we know that secrets can be told and still be viewed as private. Solove explains that “Information about an individual […] is diffused in the minds of a multitude of people and scattered in various documents and computer files across the country” (The Digital Person 43). That is, private information can still be shared and does not have to be considered secret. How and to whom information is concealed, revealed, or accessed matters: One might post their prior jobs on Facebook, but wouldn’t want this information aggregated in a directory on another Web site. Privacy needs to be understood as contextual.

Common Conception #3: Privacy as Control over Information

The fact that information can be shared yet still be viewed as private leads to the next common perception of privacy that limits our ability to consider the concept in its full complexity: We often conceive of privacy as the ability to control information. But, as Nissenbaum explains, privacy is not simply a “right to control information about themselves,” but instead “ensuring that it flows appropriately” (2). Definitions of privacy that rely on control over information fail to take into account the fact that just because someone shares information, their privacy is not being invaded or violated (Parent). They might not have control over the information, but they are
probably concerned about how that information travels. Taking into account access allows for the consideration of how people share information and expect it to flow. Telling someone something in a face-to-face conversation is different from revealing that information in an email, which is different from a hand-written letter: We have different expectations about how that information will flow. Thus, an important aspect of privacy is not merely control over information (though this is important as well), but control over how information is accessed and how information flows. So, again, privacy is always contextual: We must understand privacy in terms of the context it is in as to whether something is perceived to be private or not—or to whom and how it is desired to be private.

This distinction over control is perhaps what most clearly separates privacy concerns from property concerns. One’s privacy is about limiting access to one’s self, behavior, information, or spaces, whereas property is defined by ownership, and thus control over information and material goods. We do not own behaviors that we do not wish others to observe or know about, nor do we own our bodies (DeCew 54). As Jean L. Cohen argues, an important development in the understanding of personal privacy in the twentieth century was that privacy was differentiated from personal property. As she further explains, we “must replace the possessive-individualist conception of the relation of self and body” with an embodied understanding of privacy in which bodily integrity is privileged as protected by privacy and central to one’s identity (159). Privacy, then, is not about control over property. The distinction between privacy and property also helps us see why users are likely to give up intellectual property rights to information (say, pictures on Facebook), but can still view these pictures as contextually private (say, outside the gaze of parents). Users chose to give up their control over information—Facebook now has that control—but have not given up their ability to manipulate access to that information.
Common Conception #4: Privacy as Solely Information Privacy

My mentioning of bodies above leads to another factor that limits a critical understanding of privacy: the focus on information. Understandably, social media sites focus on information; that is what they are collecting and disclosing. However, as DeCew argues, focusing solely on information ignores other aspects of the cluster concept of privacy: access to the self, including physical bodies and spaces, and expressive privacy, which she describes as protecting “a realm for expressing one’s self-identity or personhood through speech or activity” (77). Understanding privacy solely in terms of information misses much of what else could be considered private in contexts: our bodies, our homes, and our activities. These aspects are important, especially for considering our inviolability and for considering the social aspects of privacy. Expressive privacy allows for the development of autonomy and for building relationships with others outside by limiting social control from others over decisions, speech, and behavior. It cannot always be reduced to information (a simple example of this would be that people may know that a couple is having sex, but that couple would not want others watching them have sex). Thus, as we consider how social media sites like Facebook conceive of privacy and encourage or discourage certain practices related to privacy, we should be cognizant not only of how information is collected and flows, but also concerns about access to the self and access to activities and speech. For instance, viewing a wall post or the joining of a group on Facebook as solely information, rather than also as an activity or expression, might miss the desired expressive privacy for that activity—the ability to make decisions free from interference or pressure. Facebook’s chat feature allows for other users to know when and for how long someone is on the site—and to have access to not just that information, but that person’s time as well. Or, to take the example I opened this dissertation with: A reason Girls Around Me seems so creepy is it provides the opportunity to invade both physical and virtual spaces. By knowing where someone is, without their knowledge, one can
also invade their personal physical space, even if they are in a public venue. And, by allowing users to send Facebook messages, the app allows for an invasion of privacy from unwanted messages.

\textbf{Common Conception #5: Privacy as Freedom from Big Brother}

Last, a critical approach to privacy is discouraged by common perceptions of surveillance, especially the metaphor of George Orwell’s Big Brother, a concept Solove critiques for its failure “to focus on the appropriate form of power”: The metaphor focuses on surveillance rather than data collection and manipulation. Surveillance is practiced and depends upon judgment and control of what is observed, but most collected data is not used to control others, but to study and exploit them (\textit{The Digital Person} 34-35). Instead of the Big Brother metaphor, Solove draws instead from Franz Kafka’s \textit{The Trial} in order to understand privacy concerns: “Kafka depicts an indifferent bureaucracy, where individuals are pawns, not knowing what is happening, having no say or ability to exercise meaningful control over the process” so that individuals don’t have “meaningful participation in decisions about our information” (38, 39). In short, the Big Brother metaphor of surveillance is misleading in digital settings because the real problem is not that there is one corporation or government surveilling us, but rather that we do not quite know how information is collected or for what purposes. Furthermore, surveillance isn’t conducted so that others can control us—it is conducted in order to understand and exploit us.

Surveillance in social networking sites can be further understood through Anders Albrechtslund’s concept of “participatory surveillance” (a term also used by Mark Poster in chapter 3 of \textit{The Mode of Information} to describe how users contribute information to databases to participate in their own surveillance). Albrechtslund uses the term to explain how a hierarchical understanding of surveillance, like the Big Brother metaphor, favors the person or
institution doing the surveillance: “The person under surveillance is reduced to a powerless, passive subject under the control of the ‘gaze.’” But in social networking sites, he explains, surveillance among participants is not about creating powerless subjects, but instead “can be part of the building of subjectivity and of making sense in the lifeworld.” Jason Farman adds that this participatory surveillance is reciprocal: participants are both watched and watchers. This reciprocity breaks down when one is solely a voyeur (who is not gazed upon) or when one is solely watched, which is “read as a loss of agency” (70). Participatory surveillance online allows for reciprocal identity construction and the ability to engage with each other. When reciprocity doesn’t happen is when users have a sense for the need for privacy, to “create spaces in which reciprocity will be achieved with those who will read us as we ‘write ourselves into being’ rather than being interpellated as a particular type of subject (such as a consumer)” (Farman 72).

Understanding privacy as a cluster concept that involves how information flows, access to the self and activities, and decentralized surveillance points to the incredibly social nature of privacy—it is a concept that is integral in developing relationships. Relating to each other is perhaps the most important aspect of Facebook for most users. This social incentive for Facebook points to one of the key problems with privacy in social media settings: Users elect to disclose information because they see the social incentives as important. As various studies have shown, the social gratifications of Facebook use override many concerns over privacy: Teenage users especially (the subjects of many of these studies) value privacy greatly, but understand the social gratifications of Facebook as important enough to disclose information (Debatin et al.; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe; Livingstone; Tufekci). This social aspect of Facebook and other social media sites again points to a fundamental problem with the public/private distinction. This dichotomy is problematic when we approach the nuances of privacy as it is actually practiced because the dichotomy ignores issues of how and in what ways people, information, and activities are accessed, and further ignores the arena of the social. I understand the arena of the social as
spaces that seem both private and public. As Karen V. Hansen describes the social in her critique of the public/private distinction as market/state versus domestic, “the social captures a field of activities and relationships that transcend the boundaries of households but are not predominantly shaped by the logic of the state or the market” (293). The social activity on Facebook needs to be understood not as simply public or private, but as a social realm where information is never quite fully public or fully private. It is this social nature of privacy, as well as the affordances of digital technologies, that are less than clear in Facebook’s privacy policy, which I turn to later in this chapter.

Rhetorical Ecologies and Technologies

Rhetorical theory has traditionally approached rhetoric through the interpretation of texts and their effects or potential effects for audiences. Increasingly, rhetorical critics and scholars are moving away from textual analysis to investigating the ecological nature of rhetorical action. As Jenny Edbauer argues, the traditional sender-message-receiver model of rhetoric is limited in that it ignores the codes and modes of circulation, processes of invention and writing, and the distribution and circulation of rhetoric. For Edbauer, an “ecological . . . rhetorical model is one that reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence and an ongoing circulation process” (13). In other words, rhetorical action does not simply move from the rhetor to an audience in a static context, but rather is in constant motion in an environment that is constantly changing and in which texts are distributed and circulated in complex, unpredictable ways. As Marilyn Cooper persuasively argues, rhetorical action (in her analysis, writing) is “always an interaction with other beings and objects in our surroundings” that “involve both body and mind are only partly and sometimes intentional” (“Being Linked” 20, 17). Cooper was perhaps the first rhetorical scholar to propose an ecological approach to rhetoric, arguing in her 1986 College English article
“The Ecology of Writing” that “writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (367).

Approaching rhetorical action as ecological, that is, taking place in an environment that is constantly in flux and changing, focuses on the dynamic nature of systems. Cooper explains that an ecological approach is not just a new way to say “context.” Contexts are often presented as static and unchanging (especially in writing instruction); ecological systems, on the other hand “are constantly changing, limited only by parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time” (“The Ecology of Writing” 368). This means that not only are environments constantly changing, but that we should also understand rhetorical action as action that affects and changes those environments; rhetoric “changes social reality” (368). As Cooper explains, words and tools mediate our engagement with our environments (“Being Linked” 17, 29).

An ecological approach to rhetoric also necessitates attending to the specific features and affordances of media. Digital media makes rhetorical action different from print or oral rhetoric. For instance, Barbara Warnick calls for a “media ecology approach” (vii) that understands that “Web content is processed and experienced in ways different from other media” (27). She applies this approach to rhetorical analysis, arguing that rhetoric works differently in online spaces than it does in print or oral situations. She argues persuasively that we need to understand how products online are never quite finished in online environments, but are instead fragmented and co-produced by users (29-30). Warnick also argues that ethos functions differently online: Instead of being the product of the rhetor and his or her credibility, ethos is determined textually, as a product of circulation and other textual features (34-35).

Brooke goes further, arguing in a move I endorse that with digital media, we should shift our attention away from analyzing texts and products toward analyzing media interfaces. This shift toward interfaces has important implications for how rhetorical scholars approach new media and analysis. Brooke defines “the interface” as more complex than “the boundary or
contact point between people and machines”; instead, “interfaces are those ‘ever-elastic middles’ that include, incorporate, and indeed constitute their ‘outside’” (24, quoting W. J. T. Mitchell).

That is, interfaces are not just media we use to contact others, but are instead digital environments that incorporate and include users. A turn toward analyzing interfaces stresses the existence of multiple, varied experiences with interfaces, and a different approach of analysis for critics.

Brooke argues that because of the dynamics of new media (e.g., frequent updates on blogs, continuously changing wikis), there is an “absence of shared experience [that] can become part of the infrastructure of the text” (11). Interacting with an interface can be a very individuated experience, as Steven Johnson notes in Interface Culture when he discusses his inability to talk with his friends about any shared understanding of the content of Michael Joyce’s hypertext story Afternoon: A Story. Johnson writes that “Each reading had produced an individual, private experience” that resulted in each friend in the conversation talking about “very different stories” (qtd. in Brooke 11).

In this way, it is important to take into account the perspective of users, which Brooke describes as looking from (134). Interfaces are constantly changing because of technological changes and different encounters in particular moments, but also because users approach interfaces differently at different moments, depending on their comfort, familiarity, and purposes in approaching the interface. If we are “interested in examining the activity and locations of textual production” in environments (Dobrin and Weisser 578), then turning toward the interface and attending to how users understand and interact with them is crucial. As Brooke explains:

The appeal of ecology as a conceptual metaphor is its ability to focus our attention on a temporarily finite set of practices, ideas, and interactions without fixing them in place or investing too much critical energy in their stability. In part, this appeal makes ecology the perfect unit of analysis for examining the
interface, itself a momentarily situated encounter among users, machines, programmers, cultures, and institutions. (42)

In this way, literacy practices are rhetorical engagements with environments, necessarily involving ideologies and discourse communities. Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser explain, “writers enter into particular environments with a certain ideological code and then contend with their environments with a certain ideological code and then contend with their environments as best those codes allow. These environments have material, social, and ideological qualities” (576). Dobrin advocates an approach to literacy from an ecological perspective, explaining, “Ecological literacy refers to a conscious awareness and understanding of the relationships among people, other organisms, and the environments in which they live” (“It’s Not Easy” 233). While his focus in discussing ecological literacy is on developing a literacy related to natural environments and understanding that “All texts . . . teach us something about places, about organisms, about relationships” (233), the concept is useful in exploring how literacy online also requires awareness of relationships among people, technologies, and interfaces.

**The Rhetorical Dimensions of Privacy**

We often think of privacy as a fundamental human right and as an *a priori* concept, as something that exists prior to ourselves, meaning that certain content or information is understood as automatically private and that what is private is static and unshifting. However, the reality of the matter is that privacy is a contested concept, one that shifts in meaning and practice over time in relation to various social factors, including new technological developments and cultural differences. Privacy norms and practices differ between and within cultures, and understandings of privacy shift even within situations depending on perspective. While privacy is often imagined as a property of the individual—his or her privacy rights, a quality that demands to be protected
by the state, by the self, and by others—it is in fact thoroughly social, mediated by language, objects, and places, up for revision and change in different situations and moments. To say that privacy is social and mediated by language and objects is also to say that it is thoroughly rhetorical, which is to say that it is open to possibilities. Here I draw on Aristotle, who in *On Rhetoric* explains that rhetoric is not about what *is* (that is, what is necessarily true), but is instead about the realm of the possible or probable (42). That is, privacy is not simply some concept that exists before practices, but is rather something that is practiced differently in different ecologies, understood differently from various perspectives, argued about in order to make claims about the common good, and practiced differently in order to change relationships or one’s environment.

Privacy, then, is rhetorical in four inter-related ways: 1) The term is used, in conjunction with its counterpart *public* (which is either implicitly or explicitly evoked) to frame discussions in different, sometimes conflicting, conceptions of the public/private distinction. These competing understandings of the public/private distinction allow rhetors to frame debates or issues in ways that may hide or make invisible how certain aspects of a situation could be cast differently as public or private. 2) Privacy serves as *doxa*, or a commonplace that people think with rather than about, to argue about the common good. Privacy is utilitarian: Rather than being an *a priori* right, it is contextual and practiced differently in different contexts for social well-being. Privacy can be used as a term to perpetuate historical injustices related to differences, particularly gendered power differences. 3) Privacy is a rhetorical practice, in that people use objects and discourses in order to engage with their environments in ways that manage visibility and accessibility to the self or to information. 4) Finally, technologies and environments encourage (but do not determine) certain practices related to privacy, making certain practices more possible or likely to occur, and other practices harder to imagine.

*Privacy* is wrought with a number of different meanings, and when it is evoked, it is often done so in contrast (either explicitly or implicitly) to its counterpart *public*. The use of the term
privacy is often used to frame a situation or debate, which can serve to make other aspects of a situation invisible. That “privacy” frames debates means that, as a rhetorical tool, “privacy” does not simply describe, but helps to create or constitute a rhetorical situation. For example, something that is private in one sense or from one perspective (say, domestic violence as being of concern only to the private family) becomes harder to argue as something of common or public concern. Nancy Fraser makes this point when she explains the rhetorical nature of the public/private distinction for making arguments about behaviors, policies, and values: Something described as private in economic terms is excluded from public debate and politics and placed in the hands of private corporations or companies; something described as domestically private is out of the purview of the state (88). In “The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction,” Jeff Weintraub unpacks the “complex family” of oppositions between private and public, arguing that when someone uses one term, they are often also referring to the definition of the other term. Weintraub offers a useful categorization of the normative and descriptive ways the dichotomy is deployed: 1) in a liberal-economic sense, where the public is state administration and the private is the market economy; 2) in a republican-virtue sense, where the public is the political community and citizenship and the private is the personal sphere; 3) in the sense used by Philippe Ariés, where public is sociality and the private is the individual; and 4) in the sense some feminists critique for the distinction in their critiques of patriarchy, where the private is understood as the family or domestic sphere and the public is the larger economic and political arenas (7). Weintraub’s categorization is useful, for as Fraser notes, rhetorics of privacy “exclude some issues and interests from public debate” by economizing them or personalizing or familiarizing them (88). While most senses of private and privacy have a corresponding sense of the public, Michael Warner does note three “senses of private that have no corresponding sense of public”: 1) experiences of inwardness and incommunicability; 2) respectfulness, impudence, and propriety; and 3) “genital or sexual” (Publics and Counterpublics 30). Generally, though, the
terms *private* and *privacy* are used in a variety of ways, sometimes meaning several things at once, and sometimes blending the sorts of meanings that Weintraub and Warner outline.

Thus, the ways that something is private or public depends on perspective. Susan Gal calls this the indexical nature of the public/private distinction. Something may be viewed as public from one perspective, but private from another perspective, and material or rhetorical actions can help to change perspectives. A public sidewalk in front of a store, for example, is a publicly-owned and traversed space, open to all, but in the moment that a store manager, who is responsible for keeping it clean, sweeps it, the space is seen as private. These “indexical gestures,” whether material practices or rhetorical actions, help to shape or frame situations so that they are seen as either public or private from various perspectives (Gal 82). Framing a situation as either public or private, then, serves to exclude perspectives that might see it as public or private in a different way.

For example, common discourses about Facebook, blogs, and Twitter emphasize how they are sites for “oversharing,” implying that users should be more reticent in public spaces and are sharing too much private information so freely (private in the sense of personal or propriety). However, what these claims of oversharing obscure is the potential for shared affective work in public. That is, the so-called “oversharing” on blogs can help to create publics where people can work through emotions, such as trauma. Steven Johnson makes this point in his article “In Praise of Oversharing” in *Time* magazine: Sometimes oversharing can be cathartic or lead toward affective work with a public, as in the case of his friend Jeff Jarvis, who blogged about his prostate cancer diagnosis and journey through his cancer treatment and recovery, including such private moments as the removal of his prostate, his experiences with a catheter, his incontinence, and his erectile dysfunction. Topics that are generally taboo in public—dying, illness, sex—might
be seen as private in one sense, but could be viewed as public, and good for the public, in another sense (Johnson; Jarvis 34-35).²

Because privacy can be understood differently and practiced differently in different contexts, it is also rhetorical in that it can be argued about. Instead of a stable concept, what is private is defined by and for the common good. Privacy serves as a public good that allows individuals and groups to develop identities away from the surveillance of others, including authority figures or dominant culture; allows individuals to decide what to share and who has access to them so that they can build intimate relationships; and helps the public to discern what issues or problems are up for debate.³ But while it is true that privacy is a public good, privacy is not an a priori right. We do not have to be concerned if it is “true” that we have an ontological “right to privacy,” for example. Rather, as Thomas Nagel argues, we need to understand claims about privacy to be moral arguments, which are not about what is true, but about what is better, that is, what is more likely because it helps to make a better world (39).

Lloyd Weinreb also argues that privacy is not an a priori right, but is something contingent upon and within communities and on circumstances. To Weinreb, privacy is utilitarian: It is defined and determined by what will most help the common good (42). That we

² Jarvis’s experiences of having cancer and writing about it serves as an example of the value of publicness online in his book Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live. While there’s value in much of his discussion, his concepts of public and private are under-theorized, often conflating various conceptions of public and not adequately theorizing how privacy is still managed online. For instance, while he went public with his prostate cancer, he does not adequately dwell on how he managed his publicness and privacy. He didn't immediately “come out” as having prostate cancer, for example; instead he managed the information, at first telling only those in his private sphere—his wife and children. Even that management failed him, as his co-worker was in his network on the website Delicious, where he had bookmarked sites about prostate cancer (35, 40). While Jarvis claims that “Even in intimate details of my life, I now default to public” (35), he doesn’t fully explore the complexities of private and public experiences, even in his primary example of the virtues of his publicness. For an excellent extended critique of Jarvis’s exploration of the public/private distinction, see David Parry’s blog post, “Privacy is a Public Value or Why I Am Not Boarding the Jarvis Bus.”

³ On privacy’s value for identity development and construction, see Moore; Nagel (9, 15); Murphy (35-36; 52).
understand privacy as contingent, argued about, and defended means that those who attempt to
defend privacy need to understand that they need to argue for privacy in terms of a common
good—an argument that includes why their version of privacy is better than other alternatives
offered in its place (Weinreb 44; Frey 60). Thus, privacy is squarely in the realm of rhetoric,
aligning with the goals of rhetoric to imagine possible futures. Nancy Welch advances this notion
of privacy as rhetorical clearly in her exploration of the public/private distinction when she
explains that her goal as a writer and teacher is to “make the classifications of public, private,
personal, and social arguable” (“Ain’t Nobody’s Business?” 28). Thus, privacy is rhetorical in
that it is a term that is descriptive, normative, and constitutive, used not just to describe, but to
frame debates.

That privacy is argued about leads to the next way in which privacy is rhetorical: It is a
commonplace used in public and personal discourses in order to make claims about the common
good. As a commonplace, privacy is often not coherently defined, but instead has force in
discourses in order to support claims. Dana Anderson’s exploration of the term identity as a
commonplace, or endoxa, is helpful here. He understands endoxa as “beliefs that are widely held,
yet open to disputation” and “those ideas we think with rather than about” (8). Privacy too
functions as endoxa: a concept deployed in order to make arguments, one thought with rather than
about. The term is deployed in order to make normative claims about how we should relate to
each other or to understand new communication or social problems.

As a commonplace, privacy can thus be deployed in ways that carry with it social and
historical baggage that can privilege certain people over others in relation to historical issues of
power and identity that continue with us today. That is, terms carry with them their historical
uses, often without our explicit awareness. An ecological model of discourse can help us to see
how we understand certain discursive actions as public or private based on prior theories of the
public and private. Sid Dobrin explains that discourse is not a priori public or private, but is
instead understood as public or private through prior theories of discourse. Each communicative moment draws on prior communications that theorize separate realms of private and public, and “is at once dependent upon and moderated by both ‘private’ and ‘public’ prior theories” (“Going Public” 216). Dobrin understands all discourse as public, since discourse is only known and interpreted through social interactions and thus is socially constructed (220). He explains, “before a discourse can be made private (the privatization of discourse?), it must first be experienced publicly. Certainly, then, we can say there is a distinction between public and private discourse, but only as a matter of convenience and codification” (221). In this way, all discourse begins as publicly mediated, and then is labeled private according to convention or necessity (221). While Dobrin’s goal is to do away with the public/private distinction in regards to discourse and view each communicative action as unique (because the distinction limits possibilities for discourses) (217)—a view I can’t entirely agree with because of the values of privacy and the strong hold the public/private distinction has on our imaginations of reality—his schema is helpful in understanding that when we describe or understand something as private we are informed by theories of discourse that have in the past understood similar communicative events as public or private.

In this way, privacy can carry with it sociohistorical inequalities in power when the term is used as endoxa. Western culture has historically afforded different understandings of privacy based one’s social situation and identity. Particularly, women, people of color, and sexual minorities have not been afforded the same rights of privacy as heterosexual white men. While it has been tempting for some, like Catherine MacKinnon, to conclude that “for women there is no private, either normatively or empirically” (191), the concept is fluid enough that it can still benefit women. Jean Cohen explains that while privacy developed in relation to private property, the freedom to make private contracts, and “entity” privacy, or familial privacy that in many ways served to protect men’s property, personal privacy has become conceptually separated from these
other notions of privacy, meaning that the concept can be useful for women in developing autonomy (139). Privacy’s application to sodomy laws can serve as an example of the flexible and changing nature of privacy as it has been applied to marginalized groups. When the Supreme Court upheld homosexual sodomy laws in their 1986 decision on *Bowers v. Hardwick*, they applied the question of privacy too narrowly, making it about homosexuals and privacy instead of privacy itself (DeCew 122). However, the Court returned to the decision in the 2003 case *Lawrence v. Texas*, overturning *Bowers v. Hardwick* and extending personal privacy rights to all people for sex in private.

Although conceptions, laws, and practices related to privacy have changed to be more inclusive and just, privacy carries with it those historical injustices that still play out today. Fraser provides an example of this holdover in her analysis of the Clarence Thomas trials, where Anita Hill was not afforded the right to privacy in discussing her sexual harassment charges against Thomas. However, Thomas was able to call upon his privacy rights in order to avoid discussing his private life. Fraser argues that disclosing one’s private life in public means to be feminized (107). Thomas’s appeal to privacy works only because he was able to deploy the term *private* as *doxa*, as a commonplace that others understand—intuitively and through a history of privacy norms—as something that protects a man’s private life from public humiliation.

In addition to a way to frame debates and serving as a commonplace, privacy is also rhetorical in that it relates to rhetorical practice with objects in environments: We use objects in order to change our environment, build relationships with others, and build up physical and emotional private spheres. Sociologist Christena Nippert-Eng helps make apparent the use of objects to manage privacy in her study of how people understand and practice privacy. In her observations on a beach, she witnessed beach-goers using umbrellas, strollers, and towers to change the environment around them and create private areas (11-14). The use of objects to affect our environments and negotiate private space is an everyday activity for most of us: We adjust
chairs in meetings so as to not be too close to someone else, we select certain tables at restaurants that are more secluded, we take phone calls into other rooms, we wear headphones in public spaces, we close doors when changing clothes or going to the bathroom. Objects, then, are used to interact with and shape our environments, making privacy an embodied material and rhetorical practice. In the examples I draw on in Chapter 2, users of mobile digital devices use these devices to manage and interact with their spaces as well, and contrary to claims that these users lack a sense of place, their work is embodied and very aware of place.

A fourth rhetorical dimension of privacy is that environments affect privacy practices, encouraging or discouraging certain practices related to privacy and publicity. The environment of a typical classroom, with desks facing forward, encourages certain practices of privacy and understandings of education: The private educational experience of the student listening to and talking to the teacher, rather than a more open, semi-public experience of working together. It also affords the opportunity for private conversations in the back of the classroom. A classroom where chairs are arranged in a circle, however, encourages a less private experience because of the change in the environment. This is not to say that these responses are determined beforehand and that arranging chairs in a circle is a magical way to get students to engage each other. Rather, practices in these classrooms depend on a whole host of factors that help to shape the ecology of the classroom.

Early iterations of Facebook’s interfaced encouraged certain attitudes toward privacy. Because the site was initially much more exclusive and less open, and because it requires a real, authentic identity (users agree to use their real name and not impersonate others or create fake profiles, though there are a number of users who violate this agreement), it encouraged the sharing of private information. Initially only open to Harvard students when Facebook began in 2003, and then expanding to other colleges and universities, Facebook’s use of “networks” encouraged viewing it as a private space where users were only likely to encounter and interact
with friends and acquaintances. The separation of the site into individual profile pages, before the development of the Newsfeed in 2006, also lent the site a feeling of privacy, making posting on a friend’s profile page feel much more private. This understanding of Facebook as a private space was encouraged by the fact that when a user logged in, they were welcomed by their own profile page and links were provided to view “My Friends,” “My Groups,” “My Messages,” and so forth.

Various changes in the ecology of the site, including opening it up to high school students in 2005, opening the site to anyone over the age of 13 in 2006, and the introduction of the Newsfeed in 2006, changed the environment and thus how users responded to the site and practiced visibility and privacy. In fact, the ecology for each user can be drastically different, and even change on a situational basis. For instance, for some users, Facebook can become a completely different space after their parents add them as friends. The environment of Facebook now constantly shifts, providing new and different content and interactions on the Newsfeed when a user logs in—a quite social space that encourages situational actions that have varying degrees of privacy and publicity, depending on the context.

To say that an environment encourages certain behaviors regarding privacy and publicity is not to say that it determines them. A number of factors influence behaviors on a site. Among those influences are the idioms of practice and media ideologies that users bring with them and develop during use that affect how they interact with the interface (thus the importance of Brooke’s concept of looking from). Thus, while environments are rhetorical in that they encourage certain behaviors and attitudes of privacy and publicity, they are also not deterministic. Instead, users interact with their environments from their perspectives, changing them through rhetorical and material practices. I understand these rhetorical practices with interfaces as a highly literate set of activities for managing privacy, as I’ll explain in the next section.
Managing Privacy Online as a Highly Literate Set of Practices

Because managing one’s privacy in social media environments involves being able to understand, interpret, and put into practice various aspects of an environment, including privacy policies, privacy settings, and interactions with others, managing one’s privacy online is a highly literate activity. In fact, as Zizi Papacharissi argues, privacy online is becoming a “luxury commodity” that requires a high degree of literacy that might not be available to most. Managing one’s privacy online can require a great deal of time, attention, and digital literacies, and those without the digital literacies to manage their privacy find themselves not as able to manage their privacy online (“Privacy as a Luxury Commodity”). I follow scholars such as Cynthia L. Selfe in understanding digital literacies not as a basic set of neutral, decontextualized skills, but instead, in the words of Selfe, “a complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including reading, writing, and communicating” (11). Thus, digital literacies involve sets of practices and actions using digital environments that take into account social, cultural, and political values and contexts.

Taking a literacies approach to concerns about privacy in social media environments affords two important insights. First, rather than reject novel actions and practices as frivolous or even harmful, a literacy approach situates those actions and practices in a rhetorical context. This approach means, in part, that users’ decisions on Facebook are understood to be informed by media ideologies, shared idioms of practice, and genealogies of practice that lead to conflicting understandings of both social media sites and social behavior (Gershon 3, 6; Sloane). Because many aspects of new media are, in a very real sense, new, there are not widespread understandings of their best uses, and users tend to approach and understand new media in a variety of ways. Ilana Gershon’s discussion of how Facebook users delete their Facebook friends
is instructive here: Some of her research subjects see removing Facebook friends as hostile acts, whereas others see friendship on Facebook as not really mattering, and thus they routinely go through bouts of de-friending. These idioms of practice, or shared meaning-making about the uses of technologies, were often developed through shared understandings of Facebook—understandings created through conversations with friends, shared practices, and experimentation (38-42). Because new communication technologies present new situations for users, they often turn to each other in order to understand those new technologies and to develop best practices within their communities. Thus, users are likely to have shared understandings of privacy settings, shared practices and understandings of tagging photos or posting on profiles, and more. In their research, Kevin Lewis, Jason Kaufman, and Nicholas Christakis discovered that users were more likely to have a private Facebook profile if their friends also did.

Conflicting understandings of “proper practices” regarding privacy on these sites is caused, in no small part, because of conflicting media ideologies, or the sets of beliefs about a communication medium that inform users’ design, perception, uses, and meaning (Gershon 3). New media are used and understood in a variety ways because there is not necessarily widespread understanding of their uses and purposes. Collin Brooke argues that because of the dynamics of new media (e.g., frequent updates on blogs, continuously changing wikis), there is an “absence of shared experience [that] can become part of the infrastructure of the text” (11). In many ways, there aren’t just differing and conflicting understandings of sites like Facebook; instead, because these sites can be put to use in various different ways, there are “many different Facebooks” (Wittkower xxiii). Regarding privacy online, these various different Facebooks can lead some to claim that users don’t care about privacy, while users themselves can claim to be very invested in privacy online. Broad claims that users do not care about privacy online are informed by media ideologies that privilege more reticence, whereas a closer look at users’ attitudes, beliefs, and
practices reveals that users do care about privacy in a myriad of ways and put those concerns into practice in multiple and various ways.

Second, rather than only seeing Facebook as exploiting users for information, a literacies approach helps us to see that users choose to navigate institutions and use literacies as sets of practices and actions for a wide range of purposes. A literacies approach to social media and privacy helps us to think about how users engage in digital environments in order to navigate social situations. Following Jeffrey Grabill, Stuart Selber, Andrew Feenberg, and others, I take a postcritical approach to literacy technologies: A postcritical approach understands that technologies are not neutral tools, but are instead cultural artifacts that influence thoughts and behaviors, but they are also here to stay. Thus a postcritical approach rejects deterministic interpretations of technologies, and takes a critical approach to the use, design, and engagement with technologies (Grabill 34; Selber 8; Feenberg 6).

Put differently, we might be tempted to reject sites like Facebook for exploiting users for their information in order to make money off that information through the selling of advertisements. However, this flat-out rejection ignores the very real social reasons that users turn to sites and are implicit in this exploitation of their information. Users share information on Facebook for a variety of social reasons: to connect with friends, to gain visibility, to develop their identities, to network professionally, to engage in shared interests, to interact in social spaces that might be outside the gaze of other parties, and more. As Bernhard Debatin and his co-authors explain, “the conveniences and gratifications of Facebook as a social tool seem to override privacy concerns” for many users (101). These social reasons have been explored by various ethnographic and survey studies, which show how users maintain relationships and create new relationships, develop social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe; Tufekci 21), and use sites like Facebook to interact in social spaces that might be outside the gaze of parents (Livingstone 405). Sociologist Harry Blatterer explains that the need for visibility on these sites is
not caused by the technologies themselves; instead, the desire for visibility is further enabled by these sites. He asked, “why do members of social networking sites voluntarily part with personal data even though that information is potentially retrievable by others who can use that information out of context and against their best interests?” (75). Blatterer argues that there is a human need for visibility that these sites make more possible to act upon, and as users share more, they become “experts not only at self-presentation but also at self-concealment” (79). That is, while users may share much information on these sites, they also make choices about what to share: There is a tension between visibility and privacy that users negotiate, which requires placing practices in context in order to understand how users negotiate this tension and what sorts of information they share, with whom, and why. And as various studies have shown, users do care about managing that tension, through using privacy settings, determining what is posted and what is kept off of sites, un-tagging pictures, deleting comments and posts that might seem inappropriate for certain audiences, and other practices (Raynes-Goldies; Boyd and Hargittai; Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, and Pérez; Lange; Livingstone 405; Tufekci 31-33; Boyd, *Taken Out of Context* 155, 166).

If managing privacy is a set of highly literate skills and practices, as I am arguing here, then it is in the purview of writing teachers and scholars to be concerned about issues and practices related to privacy online. As Anne Frances Wysocki argues, writing teachers and scholars bring an understanding that communication is always contextual and situated to scholarship on new media, which can help to situate practices and assist users in making decisions in new media settings. She explains, “Writing teachers help others consider how the choices we make in producing a text necessarily situate us (or can try to avoid situating us) in the midst of ongoing, concrete, and continually up-for-grabs decisions about the shapes of our lives” (“Opening New Media” 7). Exploring the contextual nature in which users choose to share or not share information and activities online, and understanding how users can do that in ways that
match their desires, is certainly part of digital literacy practices, and thus part of our charge as teachers of writing. Additionally, as writing teachers consider incorporating social networking sites into their classes to explore rhetorical aspects of these sites, including identity construction and technological literacy (Vie; Maranto and Barton), it is increasingly important to explore the difficulties of managing privacy as users (including students and teachers) write and work in these spaces.

In the next section, I discuss an example site of literacy (Facebook), exploring how affordances of the site make privacy, especially controlling the access to information, a highly social and distributed activity—other users in one’s network, as I explain, exert control over access to a user’s information through their privacy settings and practices on Facebook.

**Facebook’s Governing Documents: Rhetorics of Control**

Importantly, the technological developments on sites like Facebook are related to the affordances of digital media that make privacy complicated online: the ability to easily publish, replicate, aggregate, and search for information. These affordances are not discussed in Facebook’s Data Use Policy (formerly its privacy policy), leaving a gap in the policy that elides how a user is not always in control of one’s information and access to one’s activities. Instead, other users are often in more control of access to a user’s information and activities because of these affordances.

An important aspect of Facebook is its governing documents: Facebook’s Data Use Policy, which outlines what information Facebook collects, how it is collected, and how it is used; its Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, which serves as a terms of service that outlines the relationship between Facebook and users that users agree to; and its Principles, which stand as a sort of philosophy that informs the Rights and Responsibilities of users. Although the majority of users probably do not read these policies, they are still important. As Halbert explains in her
analysis of terms of service documents for online services, including various online games, virtual worlds, and Facebook, “the terms of service (TOS) agreements [. . .] governing virtual worlds have important implications for the political and legal structures under which our virtual selves will function.” Even without reading the governing documents, users’ experiences on a site are shaped by these sorts of documents, as the TOS serves as a sort of law.

Privacy policies and other governing documents of websites have come under increasing scrutiny from rhetoric, communication, and new media scholars. Justin Grimes, Paul Jaeger, and Kenneth Fleischmann argue in their study of governing documents for virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life that these documents govern through “obfuscated code”: governing documents contain technical and legal jargon; are housed in various locations, making them hard to access; and are updated frequently without logs of those modifications. Markel adds to our understanding through his analysis of corporations’ privacy policies on their Web sites: They often work through misdirection, as they are written in ways that prevent users from understanding them so that companies can exploit users’ data.

Exploitation of users’ data is key to most of these studies. In their study of privacy statements, Fernback and Papacharissi explained how these statements often “allow companies to profit from consumer data” (715). Though privacy statements prepare the user for a guarantee of privacy protection (since they are not ‘disclosure statements’), the vocabulary of the statement itself rarely offers explicit privacy protection. [. . .] Privacy statements generally serve two major purposes: to mollify consumers wary of conduction transactions online for fear of privacy violations; and to convince regulators that further legislative initiatives to guarantee consumer privacy are unnecessary, since the industry self-policing efforts sufficiently protect citizen rights. (719)
Fernback and Papacharissi argue that privacy policy statements are in actuality marketing tools: They are meant to give users a sense of comfort about their privacy and sell companies as ethical in the eyes of users and regulators. In effect, “company privacy policies are often invasive rather than protective; they describe how consumer privacy is systematically undermined” (730).

While these analyses focus on how privacy policies use misdirection and mollify consumers in order to exploit information, I am less interested in how Facebook exploits information. That Facebook “exploits” users’ information for advertising and financial gain is well known and commonplace. Users choose to share their information and activities with Facebook for a variety of social and personal reasons: to document lives, to share experiences and build relationships with contacts, to gain visibility and acknowledgment, to develop an online (and offline) identity, and more.

Instead, I am interested in placing Facebook’s privacy policy in conversation with the site’s interface in order to show how other users’ privacy settings control access to and the flow of information and activities because of the specific affordances of social media: aggregation, replicability, searchability, and ease of publishing. Put differently, I am interested in placing the policy within the ecology of the specific Web site under investigation in order to explore how information actually flows on the Web site. Indeed, unlike other privacy policies, Facebook’s can be fairly clear, though, as Nissenbaum points out, it “is likely to leave one hard-pressed to map accurately and fully the flows of personal information allowed by these policies” (222). Part of the difficulty in determining how information flows on Facebook lies in the fact that Facebook’s rhetoric largely ignores that other users’ privacy settings actually have great control over your information. It accomplishes this through a rhetoric of protection and control that ignores certain features of the Web site.

Facebook’s privacy policy is not an exception to the analyses described above: It is largely a document meant to represent and create a relationship between Facebook and its users.
While most users probably do not read the privacy policy (it is longer than the U.S. Constitution, after all), it serves many of the functions discussed above for those who do read it: It creates a modicum of trust by users, and gives users a sense of control over information. Facebook’s privacy policy is organized according to the ways information is received (information users provide, information Facebook collects, and information from third parties), shared (on Facebook or with third parties), and used. Despite relative ease of navigation, the policy’s length makes it unlikely that a typical user will read it, given the contexts in which many users sign up for social networking sites.

Facebook uses a rhetoric of safety and protection throughout its privacy policy. Some information is collected “to make Facebook easier to use,” “to protect you (and Facebook),” and “to keep Facebook safe and secure” (“Data Use Policy”). This sort of rhetoric of protection and safety makes the sort of privacy violations that concern legal scholars like Solove seem less like violations (“A Taxonomy”). For example, users are given the choice to opt out of, rather than opt into, features like social ads that appropriate one’s likeness to benefit advertisers.

Additionally, information about the privacy policy and changes to those policies are spread throughout different documents and spaces on Facebook (the Data Use Policy, the Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, and the Facebook Site Governance Page)—similarly to Grimes, Jaeger, and Fleischmann’s charge against other governing documents. Users are notified of changes to the privacy policy on the Facebook Site Governance Page, but users must “Like” that page in order to receive those updates in their Timeline—and even then, those updates might be missed if a user doesn’t view their timeline in the right window of time. Facebook’s governing policies outline that users have a say in privacy policy changes, but only if enough users comment on a possible change to bring it to a vote (“Statement of Rights and Responsibilities”). Though Facebook suggests a sense of user control and input here, and Facebook is legally safe according to current United States laws, again concerns arise around possible privacy violations: Changes in
privacy policies without proper notification or consent can lead to breach of confidentiality or the disclosure of information a user did not want (see Solove, “A Taxonomy” 526-535).

This rhetoric of safety is supported by a rhetoric of control throughout Facebook’s governing documents, which claim that a user “can control how [information] is shared” by using privacy settings and application settings (“Facebook Principles”). Tensions arise, however, in Facebook’s verbal rhetoric, which attempts to value both an ethic of visibility and access and an ethic of user control. Facebook’s Principles statement advocates “openness and transparency by giving individuals greater power to share and connect” (“Facebook Principles”). This “power to share and connect” marks a tension among Facebook’s first three principles, which promote three freedoms for users: “the freedom to share whatever information they want,” “the freedom to decide with whom they will share their information,” and “the freedom to access all of the information made available to them by others” (“Facebook Principles”). Facebook’s principles promote user visibility (share as much as you want with whom you want) and user access (you should have access to everything shared with you), two values that are in tension with the rhetoric of control throughout the site. Because of the aggregation of data, information is able to be moved and manipulated, and thus accessible in new and different ways that can be surprising to users. This increases access, a boon in Facebook’s view, but makes the issue of various unintended audiences more acute.

Facebook’s rhetoric of control continues throughout its privacy policy. The term “control” occurs frequently, stressing users’ ability to control their information and presence on the site. Users can navigate the document to find how to “Control each time you post” and have “Control over your profile.” Language elsewhere in the document stresses the ability to control visibility: “When you select an audience for your friend list, you are only controlling who can see it on your profile. We call this a profile visibility control” (“Data Use Policy”). If a user reads through the privacy policy, he or she might feel assured that indeed the control of information is
entrusted in the user, and not elsewhere. After all, the privacy policy explains which privacy settings control what type of information, what the default settings are, and where they can be changed.

However, underneath the headings “Control each time you post” is a caveat, which I find key to understanding how control of access to information occurs on Facebook: “When you comment on or "like" someone else's post, or write on their Wall, that person gets to select the audience” (“Data Use Policy”). Other caveats (now, in the 2011 version of the policy, marked with a light bulb icon) note that information posted on a page or public story will be publicly available. An older version of the privacy policy had only one statement related to how information might be publicly available based on others’ settings: “When you post information on another user’s profile or comment on another user’s post, that information will be subject to the other user’s privacy settings.” Despite these notices, Facebook’s privacy settings (again, like the policy, centrally located with supplemental pages for additional settings) do not mention this at all. Facebook’s privacy settings page at first appears simple: Users can choose between making information available to “Public,” “Friends,” or “Custom.” These options simplify a process that was once much more difficult for users to navigate, but once one begins to customize privacy settings, this can become a time consuming and laborious process. Privacy management, as a result, becomes a very labor-intensive process requiring high levels of digital literacy: finding various options, interpreting those options, and putting them in relation to the interface.

Although labor-intensive and possibly overwhelming to use, Facebook’s privacy settings interface does give users a sense of control—unless they are confused (and researchers have shown that these settings can be confusing; see Madejski, Johnson, and Bellovin, who found that all the users in their study were either sharing or hiding personal information in ways they had not intended). However, I argue that this is just a sense of control. This appearance of control masks

the social nature of privacy online: Others’ privacy settings are as important as your own. Just as
the privacy policy is couched in a discourse of control and ignores technological features that
give other users control of information, so do the privacy settings. Nowhere in these settings
options is there a clear caveat that no matter what settings you choose, others’ privacy settings
and choices are just as important, or more important, for the protection of your information. Let
me provide a few examples to clarify this point.

The News Feed on Facebook provides an example of how the technological functions
described above converge, and how control over access to information is distributed throughout
one’s network on social media sites. When Facebook rolled out the News Feed in 2006, users
were upset because now, when I wrote on a friend’s wall, it would be available to our mutual
friends on their News Feed. Previously, a user had to go directly to a profile to see if someone
had written on their wall, whereas now with the News Feed, information that was quickly posted
was now aggregated, disseminated, and more easily available for monitoring. Not only has
aggregation affected how information is accessible, but also my friend’s privacy settings affect
who can see this post in their News Feed (his friends, a limited group of his friends, everyone on
Facebook, or anyone online).

More recently, the development of the news ticker in the upper right hand corner of
Facebook’s homepage provides an even more striking example. This news ticker provides real-
time updates to your friends’ activity, including comments on posts and pictures. Numerous users
complain that this development is distracting (and users have developed plugins for their
browsers that remove the ticker), but more users complain that now any activity they do on
Facebook might show up on their friends’ news ticker. An individual user has no control over
whether their activity is displayed in this ticker. Instead, it is up to their friend’s privacy settings
whether it shows up or not. For example, if I comment on a friend’s picture, my comment only
shows up in the news ticker of other friends if my friend’s privacy settings allow for it—if their
picture is made public or is available to friends of friends. These two examples show how publication, aggregation, and monitoring converge on Facebook, and the ticker reveals one of the ways in which other users’ privacy settings affect how accessible one’s activities are to others.

In addition, it is important as we consider managing privacy online that sites like Facebook are not sealed off from the rest of the Internet. Instead, information is aggregated into larger databases on the Web. Many users may not be aware that by writing on the wall of a public group or event, that users can be found via Google searches, even if they make their profile invisible to searches within Facebook. For instance, I was interested in hiring an intern a few years ago, and decided to search for her on Facebook. When I couldn’t find her, I Googled her. One of the top hits led me to a Facebook group: A friend of hers had broken his cell phone and created a public group where friends commented, leaving their cell phone numbers (a frequent activity amongst Facebook users seeking their friends’ contact information after losing or breaking a phone). Not only did I now have access to her limited profile (including her AOL instant messenger screen name and her arts and entertainment interests), but I also had her cell phone number. This Facebook user had clearly selected the privacy option to not be found via searches, but this option did not matter because she commented on a group that someone else chose to make publicly available.

These examples show how access to one’s information and activities on Facebook are not controlled solely by the individual user and her privacy settings, but instead by others’ privacy settings and activities. Because of the affordances of digital environments—easy publication, aggregation of data, replicability, ease of search, and permanence of information—and the convergence of technological functions that allow for the possible violations of privacy, others within one’s network have as much control over how a user’s information and activities are accessed. None of these features are particularly unique to Facebook. Instead, Facebook is an
ideal site of analysis because these features converge in various and clear ways on one social media site.

**Popular Discourses about Privacy: Nostalgia, Antisocial Youth, and Literacy Crises**

In this section I turn to popular discourses about privacy, drawing mainly from newspaper and magazine articles, but also some books and blog posts, in order to explore popular understandings of shifting notions and practices of privacy in social networking sites. Facebook in particular has drawn most of the media attention to it regarding privacy, partially because the site is the most popular, but also because privacy settings and policies have changed a number of times since its creation in 2004. Countless articles and editorials share stories of privacy violations, tales about the indiscretions of young users, and outrage at changing privacy policies on Facebook. Additionally, Facebook and its founder Mark Zuckerberg have been the subject of two books, David Kirkpatrick’s *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* and Ben Mezrich’s *The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook, A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal*, the latter of which became the basis of David Fincher and Aaron Sorkin’s popular and academy award winning 2010 drama *The Social Network*. Other treatments of Facebook include the 2010 documentary *Catfish*, about the discovery of an elaborate hoax on Facebook, and various parody videos on sites like YouTube, College Humor, and others that mock Facebook sociability—an archive that warrants its own study for common conceptions about Facebook sociability.

As an increasingly present part of many users’ lives, Facebook has received more media attention than is possible to cover here, but a quick sampling is warranted to explore how social media sites are understood in popular discourses. As Altman explains, how we discuss new technologies is important for how we understand them and take them up (16). Marita Sturken and
Douglas Thomas add that rhetorics about new technologies often say more about us and our values than about how the media is actually used. As they explain, “Emergent technologies have been the fuel for social imaginings, both of what society should be and of its potential to go farther off course from some ideal path to betterment” (1). Rhetoric about the Internet, they explain, often relies on this conjunction of utopian and dystopian thinking. Some praise the Internet for making it possible for better, stronger, and more connectivity with the possibility for more equality and a more globalized, democratic world, while other express fears that human connectivity is lost, and that we are becoming more isolated, antisocial, and disconnected (3). But it is not merely that these rhetorics, whether utopian or dystopian, reveal anxieties and hopes about new communication technologies—they are also productive, affecting how new technologies are integrated into the lives of users and how people understand them (3).

My analysis here is admittedly limited, but I want to highlight three themes in popular discourses about Facebook and privacy. The first is a nostalgia for an unmediated “real world” past that had more personal privacy and people engaged with each other more face-to-face in contrast to the isolated digital mediation of today. The second theme draws on that nostalgia to promote a moral panic that depicts youth as increasingly anti-social, as isolated and alone, without a sense of privacy and with an increasing inability to connect face-to-face. The third connects this moral panic to the literacy crisis, making narratives about lost privacy interconnected to narratives about decreasing literacy due to digital media. After I overview these three threads, which overlap, I turn to discussion of how these narratives often ignore actual, embodied practices with social media technologies that integrate these technologies into users’ everyday lives.

Much of the rhetoric about digital media relies on nostalgia for a past with more face-to-face communication, more reticent privacy practices, and more vibrant public spaces. Of course, we often understand new media through nostalgia, as we interpret new media based on
experiences—imaged or real— with other media. Nostalgia is perhaps inescapable, but, as Johndan Johnson-Eilola explains in his discussion of the rhetorics surrounding hypertext in the 1980s and 1990s, “Nostalgias are ideological—not in the sense of false consciousness, but of necessarily partial and conflictual representations of social reality. In tracing that longing, we find we want not so much the past itself as what our image of the past projected our future to be” (176). Just as nostalgic rhetoric about hypertext marks a longing for “the innocence we sometimes assumed marked human existence prior to print, an impossible Eden of pure knowledge and perfect communication unmarked by the ‘complications’ of technology” (176), nostalgic rhetoric about privacy online often calls upon a more perfect past, one that helps us to argue about what the social and political present should look like.

Nostalgia, as it is deployed in popular rhetoric about Facebook privacy, particularly longs for practices of privacy when they occurred in material, physical spaces and places, and idealizes face-to-face communication, which is viewed as more authentic and more intimate. For instance, when Facebook rolled out their (quickly embarrassing) program Beacon in 2007, it was easy for The New York Times’ Christopher Caldwell to compare shopping in physical locations in the past to shopping now. Beacon, a short-lived software component that posted shopping information on Facebook profiles when users made purchases on integrated sites, was opt-out, meaning that a user had to intentionally select an option so that purchase information was not posted on their Facebook profile. In a case that garnered much attention, a Massachusetts man bought a diamond ring for his wife, and the activity posted to Facebook, ruining the Christmas surprise. Speculation and outrage about privacy proliferated: What if this ring had not been for his wife? What if he was buying something embarrassing that he didn't want his 720 friends to know about? Caldwell saw this as a perfect moment to lament how creepy behavior is now normal online: “We used to live in a world where if someone secretly followed you from store to store, recording your
purchases, it would be considered impolite and even weird. Today, such an option can be redefined as ‘default’ behavior.”

Face-to-face connections of the past are idealized in the narratives about online activity, creating concerns that we are too tied behind a scene and that new privacy practices are making us creepy and harming our face-to-face sociality. In another example, Guardian columnist Tom Hodgkinson also questions Facebook’s ability to create connections: “Doesn’t it rather disconnect us, since instead of doing something enjoyable such as talking and eating and dancing with my friends, I am merely sending them ungrammatical notes and amusing photos in cyberspace, while chained to my desk?” Concerns abound that with sites like Facebook, users will see less incentive to meet face-to-face. Philosopher Mariam Thalos makes this claim in her contribution to Facebook and Philosophy, expressing that Facebook “might make a wide range of face-to-face interactions obsolete” (75). Without face-to-face bonding, Thalos worries that we will become more isolated: “Bonding represents a commitment, and a medium that fosters it also fosters commitment. On the other hand, a medium that inhibits bonding will foster isolation instead. Facebook, over time, will do the latter” (85). For Thalos, face-to-face encounters promote a credible, committed self-presentation. It is not Facebook itself that prevents bonding, she clarifies; it is that self-presentation must be credible, fixed, and enduring in order to facilitate bonding, and because of the nature of online discourse, we can easily change how we present ourselves and to whom (86).

These are just a few examples of writers extolling the virtues of face-to-face communication and expressing concerns that online interactions are moving users away from embodied interactions in physical environments. These concerns are further elaborated in a moral panic that youth don’t care about privacy anymore, are indiscriminate about posting information online, and are thus increasingly anti-social as they withdraw from face-to-face encounters and become attached to screens, leading to isolation and a loss of the private self. As a 2007 London
Sunday Times headline reads, “the children of the internet age are ready to bare their bodies and souls in a way their parents never could” (qtd. in Livingstone 395). Headlines and stories focus on oversharing online, blaming both users for their dumb decisions and social media sites for their lack of clarity or ethics in privacy controls. The New York Times editorialized in 2006 that “Many young people think nothing of posting intimate material on the Web, whether its daily minutiae, personal poems or snapshots of a fraternity beer pong tournament” (“Online Party Crashers”).

And, of course, mass media doesn’t shy away from enjoying the repercussions of youth’s “oversharing” online. In response to news that potential employers were searching for job applicants’ profiles on Facebook, the same New York Times editorial almost gloated that youth are finally “getting . . . an education in the virtues of privacy” (“Online Party Crashers”). In a story about responses to Facebook’s unveiling of the News Feed in 2006, which aggregated users’ updates from their profile pages into a homepage on Facebook, making expressions more accessible, The New York Times cast understandings of privacy as a generational split: “If there is a single quality that separates those in their late teens and early 20’s from previous generations of young people, it is a willingness bordering on compulsion to broadcast the details of their private lives to the general public” (St. John). Once again, The New York Times turns to a wake-up call: Because of the News Feed, young people were getting their comeuppance. Shocked to find their information and activities more accessible to others, users were upset. As one young adult explains, “we didn’t realize how much of our personal information we were putting out there. . . . You don’t see it until you get it served on a platter” (St. John).

The moral panic about youth’s increasing anti-sociality due to digital communication are represented well in three arguments published in 2010: Zadie Smith’s New York Review of Books review of The Social Network, Hilary Stout’s New York Times column “The Anti-Social Network,” and Camille Paglia’s evisceration of Lady Gaga in the London Sunday Times. All three contend that screens are destroying youth sociality and the Internet is corrupting youth’s ability to
connect. The focus on how new technologies are corrupting youth is not new: As many scholars have shown, the corruption of children has been a common trope when new technologies emerge, including claims that automobiles would isolate youth from their families, and that dime novels would teach criminality and other anti-social behavior (see Baym 42). But the corruption brought by digital communication brings a new extremity to describing youth’s anti-sociality: They are isolated, alone, have no sense of privacy, and are affectless and unable to be sociable face-to-face. Smith describes what she calls “Generation Facebook” as putting all their private information online, which reduces them to “a set of data” so that “Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendship. Language. Sensibility.” Users transcend their bodies, losing “our messy feelings, our desires, our fears” as they spend all their time on Facebook and other social networking sites. This leads to “superficial relationships” and a loss of a sense of the self as “A private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself.”

Stout argues that youth’s digital activities are concerning because their material practices lead to isolation and inhibit their ability to truly connect to each other. In a nostalgic turn to the past, Stout echoes a common claim: Youth today are too attached to their screen and too afraid to actually connect to each other face-to-face, or even through voice contact on phones. Citing statistical data from the Pew Research Center, Stout notes that 54 percent of youth text their friends every day, but only 33 percent actually talk to their friends face-to-face every day. This, she claims, should be our primary concern about digital communication—more so than other overly hyped concerns like texting sexual images or cyberbullying—because it’s possible that

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5 I find the connection between automobiles and teen sociality fascinating. Today, teenage automobile ownership of the 1960s is idealized and romanticized despite initial concerns that automobiles would separate youth from their families. Recent trends in youth driving habits show that fewer U.S. teenagers are getting driver’s licenses, owning cars, and driving. A BBC report speculates that this is partially because of increased gas prices and congested traffic, but also because teens are choosing to spend their money on cell phones and other technology and are communicating more online (Wheeler).
“the quality of their interactions is being diminished without the intimacy and emotional give and take of regular, extended face-to-face time.” She explains:

Children used to actually talk to their friends. Those hours spent on the family princess phone or hanging out with pals in the neighborhood after school vanished long ago. But now, even chatting on cellphones or via e-mail (through which you can at least converse in paragraphs) is passé. For today’s teenagers and preteens, the give and take of friendship seems to be conducted increasingly in the abbreviated snatches of cellphone texts and instant messages, or through the very public forum of Facebook walls and MySpace bulletins. (Stout)

Drawing on a number of psychologists, Stout also expresses concern that youth won’t have a “bosom buddy” like prior generations did, and will have trouble developing trust in others and empathy for others. They will have difficulty, she claims, in reading social cues because of these superficial relationships online. (I have to wonder how many teenagers saw their friends face-to-face on a daily basis in the past, before they were using cell phones and social media. Growing up on a farm, I certainly didn’t see friends outside of school; many weekends and good parts of summers were often spent in social isolation until I got a job when I was 17.)

As Smith’s and Stout’s accounts above reveal, much of the public imagination around Facebook and other Internet sites revolve around concerns that youth are constantly connected to their computers rather than in each other’s actual presence. However, the fear that teenagers and young adults are on their screens far too much and never interact with each other is a dystopian narrative that often ignores the lived realities of teenagers and young adults. It is also a narrative that gets recounted time and time again with new technologies: When I was growing up in the 1980s, for example, the narrative was that we children were spending too much time in front of the television and not enough time with our families, with our friends, and outside. Much like the moral panic around children glued to televisions for eight hours a day, stories about teenagers in
front of their computers, looking at their cell phone screens, and isolated from each other resonate with a vast amount of Americans, particularly adults who find youth’s developing technological practices unsettling and strange.

But these narratives do not carry weight only with older, non-Facebook users. They also carry weight with youth and young adults themselves, even as it contradicts their own lived experiences. As a writing teacher, every term I teach first-year writing, I have students who want to write essays or share in class about how Facebook is “harming relationships” or not “real communication.” In one course, my students read Camille Paglia’s scathing critique of Lady Gaga in the London Sunday Times. In her column, Paglia indicts not only Lady Gaga for her inauthenticity, but also her fans, whose “voices have atrophied: they communicate mutely via a constant stream of atomized, telegraphic text messages. Gaga’s flat affect doesn’t bother them because they’re not attuned to facial expressions. They don’t notice her awkwardness because they’ve abandoned body language in daily interactions.” In short, Paglia argues that youth are so often behind screens that they can no longer relate to each other with their bodies. While many students rejected this narrative, a few nevertheless agreed with Paglia. I found this shocking, given their own sociable face-to-face interactions in class, and how the Facebook and Twitter updates I see from these same students are often about face-to-face interactions they recently had or were about to have with their friends. The narratives about youth’s declining sociability because of their physical isolation, private information online, and increasing communication via screens resonates not only with adults, but with the users themselves.

The privacy crisis depicted in popular media is intricately linked to a perceived literacy crisis, the third theme about popular discourses I would like to highlight. This is evident in Smith’s account when she contrasts her own social circle to “Generation Facebook”: she texts in full sentences, whereas youth use abbreviations; language is being reduced online, and youth don’t have the language to express themselves, instead writing in abbreviations with affective
markers unrecognizable to Smith. When she imagines a young Facebook user writing on the wall of a deceased friend (“Sorry babes! Missin’ you!!! Hopin’ u iz with the Angles. I remember the jokes we used to have LOL! PEACE XXXXX”), Smith expresses that “It’s only poor education. They feel the same way as anyone would, they just don’t have the language to express it.” And as we saw in accounts I mentioned above, youth are sending “ungrammatical notes” (Hodgkinson).

Privacy and literacy are tied together so strongly that even as early as 1994, it was a concern for Sven Birkerts in The Gutenberg Elegies, where he laments declining literacy because of the Internet. The idealized literacy of being alone, privately reading a book in leisure, conflicts with the hectic, interconnected image of reading and writing for the web. Birkerts writes, “When everyone is online, when the circuits are crackling, the impulses speeding every which way like thoughts in a fevered brain, we will have to rethink our definitions of individuality and our time-honored ideals of subjective individualism. And of the privacy that has always pertained thereto” (220). Concerned about “invisible elsewheres,” Birkerts argues that there is a decline in literacy because of the Internet and the subsequent lack of depth and duration in our thinking (219). He idealizes books as “a portable enclosure, a place I can repair to to release the private, unsocialized dreaming self. A book is solitude, privacy; it is a way of holding the self apart from the crush of the outer world” (164). Reading print is “essentially private,” the communication of private experiences from the sender to the receiver who reads in private (122). As early as 1994, then, we have concerns that the Internet was causing both “contractions in the private sphere” and declining literacy (131).

These three themes in popular discourses about Facebook—nostalgia for face-to-face communication, the moral panic of anti-sociability, especially in youth, and a connected literacy crisis—recur in discourses about social media and other digital technologies and resurface frequently in my analyses throughout this dissertation. For example, in Chapter 2, where I discuss the uses of mobile devices like laptops and cell phones in public spaces, I explore the “discourse
of crisis” (Reynolds, *Geographies* 24) that mourns the loss of public spaces—a discourse animated in part by nostalgia for unmediated public sociality in coffee shops and a certain historically privileged type of public discourse. Nostalgia, moral panics, and literacy crises are three frequent popular responses to changing social and literate practices with new technologies, discourses that in many ways are exigencies for my discussions throughout this dissertation.

**Outline of the Dissertation**

Thus far I have explained how privacy is a cluster concept, involving informational privacy, spatial and bodily privacy, and expressive privacy, and a set of rhetorical and literate practices and behaviors users draw upon to engage in their environments. Privacy is rhetorical in a number of ways—in that it is used to frame issues, is drawn upon as a commonplace, and is argued about, and in that interfaces encourage certain practices related to privacy and publicity. I have argued that privacy is thoroughly social, providing an example from Facebook that despite its rhetoric of user control, privacy is in fact controlled throughout one’s social network on the site by others’ practices and privacy settings. The affordances of digital media—permanence, replicability, scalability, searchability, and aggregation—mean that privacy functions differently in social media environments than in physical spaces or in print. But changing practices related to privacy online have been responded to in popular discourses by moral panics that site youth as indiscriminately sharing and not concerned with privacy—a belief that is used to portray youth as anti-social and incapable of face-to-face sociability. This moral crisis is also intricately tied to a literacy crisis—as literacy declines in online environments, according to this narrative, so does our ability to protect our private selves.

In the rest of this dissertation, I continue to explore the rhetorical and social dimensions of privacy in digital environments by exploring four concepts that are intricately related to
privacy: *materiality, identity, intimacy, and sociability*. I turn to four studies of significant rhetorical practices—the uses of mobile devices like laptops and cell phones in public spaces, the research and aggregation of identities in online environments, sexting by teenagers and young adults, and Josh Harris’s 1990s experiments involving surveillance and privacy, in order to explore these concepts. In each of these analyses, I attend to popular and scholarly discourses, interfaces used, and practices with devices and interfaces in order to build a rhetorical understanding of privacy.

In Chapter 2, I explore the material practices of managing privacy in public spaces through the uses of objects, including mobile phones and laptops. The increased use of mobile phones and laptops in public spaces like coffee shops have prompted a “discourse of crisis” (Reynolds, *Geographies* 24) that public spaces are being privatized by users of these devices—discourses that depend on a nostalgia for an idealized face-to-face sociality of coffee shops. In order to investigate these practices and the discourses surrounding them, I investigate the practices of two graduate students who write in coffee shops and a particular material response to those who “isolate” themselves in public spaces: Snakes & Lattes Board Game Café, a café in Toronto that bans wifi and laptops and encourages sociability through board game playing in public. This chapter argues that people have always used mobile objects—books, magazines, newspapers, board games, cigarettes, cell phones, laptops, and so forth—in order to manage and interact with their environments. Objects serve as a sort of *ethos* that people use to create relationships and to create private spaces. What makes laptops and cell phones different than other mobile objects is the secrecy of what’s behind the screen. Drawing on Jason Farman’s work on mobile interfaces and Shuhei Hosokawa’s theorizing of the Walkman, Sony’s mobile audio cassette player, I theorize that mobile devices are particularly disturbing because accesses to virtuals proliferate—but virtuals are secret and not available to others. Nostalgia for face-to-face sociality in coffee shops serves to ignore the nuances of actual practices in public spaces—
particularly how these practices are embodied and have a strong sense of place—and privilege unmediated public discourse while ignoring that even coffee shops have historically been sites of secrecy, discourse mediated through multimodal literacy, and mobility.

In Chapter 3, I investigate issues of privacy and identity by turning to the case of Tyler Clementi, the gay Rutgers undergraduate who committed suicide in 2008 after his roommate, Dharun Ravi, spied on him using a webcam. When reporting on the invasion of privacy and Clementi’s suicide, mass media portrayed the situation as a case of recorded sex posted online and made public, and that Ravi’s invasion of Clementi’s sexual experiences caused Clementi’s suicide. In actuality, there was no sex, no recorded video, no posting online for public access, and likely no causation. What I find more interesting, then, is the literate and discursive activities before, during, and after the webcam incident. Before meeting Clementi, Ravi spent time researching Clementi online, developing an image of who Clementi was based on his externalized private information left on various sites. Mass media, particularly the website Gawker, followed a similar logic regarding Clementi, attempting to discover who exactly he was through his mediated traces left online. During Ravi’s trial for invasions of privacy, bias intimidation (New Jersey’s term for a hate crime), and tampering with evidence and a witness, digital evidence was again key, used to make arguments about Ravi’s character (as a homophobe). I use these examples to argue that identity is increasingly externalized online, left as a series of digital traces that others use to construct one’s identity. Rhetorical scholars have typically approached identity online as situated performances, but I argue it is just as necessary to attend to how people construct others’ identities through their private information posted in various locations online.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the moral panic surrounding sexting, the sending and receiving of sexually explicit or suggestive images and texts. Sexting has become a particular problem because when teenagers have sent sexualized images of themselves, others in their schools have forwarded these on, resulting in extreme bullying, suicides, and strong legal penalties for
teenagers. The moral panic surrounding bullying has resulted in a “public pedagogy” (Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation* 38) about sexting that teaches young women to protect their privacy and just not sext, rather than explore the ethics of not sharing others’ images. I argue that, like other moral panics, this moral panic has targeted the wrong problem: Sexting is not the problem, but rather a sexist cultural logic of privacy that blames young women and girls for making themselves vulnerable disproportionately to how much blame it puts on others—particularly young men who expect to receive such images and forward them on. Privacy, then, is still incredibly gendered, and our culture has not yet extended the sorts of expectations and rights of privacy to women and girls as it extends to men and boys.

Chapter 5 shifts its attention to the film *We Live in Public*, Ondi Timoner’s 2009 Sundance-award-winning documentary about the rise and fall of 1990s dot com millionaire Josh Harris and his socio-technological experiments about surveillance and privacy. In his 1999 project Quiet, Harris constructed a capsule hotel where residents lived under constant camera surveillance for nearly a month without leaving, and in 2000, Harris and his girlfriend Tanya Corrin lived in their apartment with dozens of webcams broadcasting their lives on the website weliveinpublic.com. Both experiments resulted in the breakdown of sociality, as participants in Quiet expressed that they were unable to develop intimacy without any privacy and even felt their sense of self deteriorating. Eventually, violence broke out as well. Harris and Corrin’s relationship fell apart, in part because they began to perform for the camera rather than to actually discuss issues and problems with each other. Timoner understands her film as a parable for the dangers of sharing too much online on social media, and reviewers of the film followed her lead, expressing that it was a “warning shot” for users of social media. I argue that the film has much to teach about the values of privacy—it is important for developing identities and relationships—but not so much to teach us about sociability on social media sites. The film takes the materiality of Harris’s experiments as a precursor to social media, but the architecture of his experiments differs
drastically from social media interfaces. Further, Harris’s experiments ignore how bodies are practiced. In order to explore sociability on social media sites, I argue, we need to attend to the particulars of specific interfaces, as well as users’ media ideologies, idioms of practice, and “sensuous training” (Wysocki, “Unfitting Beauties” 104), or how our bodies have been trained for affective and aesthetic responses to texts. Grand narratives about the future of sociability online are typically misguided, as they miss the nuances of actual bodily practices with digital media in specific ecologies.

In the conclusion, Chapter 6, I turn to the question, “What might digital literacies of privacy look like?” As I have already argued, managing privacy online is a highly literate set of practices and activities. In the conclusion, I outline a heuristic for understanding the literacies necessary for managing privacy on social media sites, drawing on Selber’s distinction between functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies. As Selber explains, these literacies are fundamentally social, even functional literacy, which often gets dismissed as being a “simple nuts-and-bolts matter” and as repressive (32-33). Facebook’s privacy settings make the social aspect of functional literacy quite apparent: Understanding and knowing how to use settings on a social media site is inherently social, as these settings are helping to situate how and in what contexts users relate to others in the service. In laying out this heuristic of literate practices related to privacy, I do not mean to emphasize just protecting one’s privacy online. Instead, I draw on several political and ethical implications of my discussion throughout the conclusion. For example, users of social media sites need to have critical approaches to the historical and current uses of privacy that have excluded certain populations—women and girls, particularly, but also racial and sexual minorities—from full civic participation. In a sense, a full rhetorical literacy of privacy helps social media users understand that privacy is arguable, up for deliberation, political, and contextual. As social media becomes more and more integrated into many of our everyday lives—and as our students continue to turn to social media services in their social and political
lives, and we ask them to investigate them as rhetorical sites and use them in our classes—it becomes increasingly important to develop a critical literacy of privacy for social media environments.
Chapter 2

Materialities and Mobilities of Technologies and Private Spaces in Coffee Shops

Figure 2-1: Laptop users working in a coffee shop (Source: Joel Washing, Flickr, Creative Commons: http://www.flickr.com/photos/joelwashing/2104633476)

This opening image—a photograph of laptop users at a coffee shop, each sitting alone, each attending to their own screen—might evoke dismay or anxiety in some readers. Coffee shops are often idealized for their histories and potentials for social and public discourse. Imagined as an ideal social space by many, including Ray Oldenburg who cites them as one of various “third
spaces” or “Great Good Places,” and imagined as the historical ideal space for face-to-face democratic conversations by Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Terry Eagleton, and others, coffee shops, perhaps more than any other available space, have a certain aura of open publicity and sociality.

In this chapter, I turn to coffee shops and mobile devices—like laptops, cell phones, e-book readers, and tablet devices—in order to explore the materiality of the public/private distinction as it relates to the use of digital devices. Popular narratives about privacy and digital media carry with them a paradox: We are simultaneously divulging more and more information, and thus losing privacy, but we are also turning inward, isolating ourselves and become more privatized. Coffee shops provide a fruitful topos for exploring this paradox and for exploring the material practices of users. One reason that coffee shops are so fruitful is their place in scholarly discussions and in popular imaginations as ideal sites for social gathering and public deliberation and because of the proliferation of both “isolated” laptop users in these spaces and rhetorical and material responses to this isolation.

The paradox that we are simultaneously connected and isolated is perhaps captured most recently in Sherry Turkle’s book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Turkle argues that while people may be more connected than ever, via computers and mobile phones, they are more alone than ever, losing the abilities for intimacy and being together in face-to-face settings. Turkle explains that relying on screens in public spaces is destroying the communal aspect of spaces:

These days, being connected depends not on our distance from each other but from available communications technology. Most of the time, we carry that technology with us. In fact, being alone can start to seem like a precondition for being together because it is easier to communicate if you can focus, without interruption, on your screen. In this new regime, a train station (like an airport, a
cafés, or a park) is no longer a communal space but a place of social collection:
people come together but do not speak to each other. Each is tethered to a mobile
device and to the people and places to which that device serves as a portal. (155)

For Turkle, users of digital devices “can always be elsewhere” (156): The “new state of the self . . .
can absent itself from its physical surround—including the people in it” (155). These digital
multitaskers “mark themselves as absent” (155) as they surf through Facebook, text with friends,
surf the web, and engage in instant messaging. They are dislocated and missed. She writes, “At a
café a block from my home, almost everyone is on a computer or a smartphone as they drink their
coffee. These people are not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence” (156). And not only
is there a new state of self who is dislocated and absent, but this new subjectivity relates
differently to others: Face-to-face conversations can be halted for the interruptions of phone calls,
texts, instant messages, Facebook comments, and so forth, so that others are “pauseable” (161).

This concern that screens are impeding our abilities to socialize in third spaces has led to
some material and rhetorical responses. One such material response to the isolated laptop user in
coffee shops is Snakes & Lattes Board Game Café, a café opened in 2010 in Toronto by Ben
Castanie and Aurelia Peynet in part as a response to cafés and coffee shops that have been taken
over by mobile workers using laptops. As Castanie explained to me in an interview, cafés like
Starbucks have “fucked it up” by allowing, even encouraging, patrons to use laptops in their
establishments. Screens distract and isolate people, and Castanie and Peynet envisioned a social
space in which people engaged with each other face-to-face.¹

Castanie and Paynet are not alone in their concerns about sociability and material
practices with laptops in coffee shops. Many New York City cafés are now restricting or even
banning the use of e-reading devices like the Kindle and iPad (Hefferman), and some New York

¹ My interview with Castanie, as well as my interviews and observations of patrons at Snakes &
Lattes and laptop users at other cafés, is IRB approved through Penn State’s IRB.
City cafés are covering up electrical outlets in order to deter laptop use (Alini). While some of these concerns are economic—a single laptop user could take a table for hours on end, bringing in less business than a series of groups who might have lunch or only chat for an hour each—other concerns are about sociability: Some business owners have held live poetry readings or jazz performances in order to shift patrons’ attention away from mobile devices and toward each other (“The New Oasis”).

In this chapter I explore these material and rhetorical responses to “laptops and their attendant air of isolation,” as Torontoist columnist Steve Kupferman describes the phenomenon in his article on Snakes & Lattes. In order to do so, I draw on interviews with and observations of patrons at Snakes & Lattes, as well as my interview with Castanie. Additionally, I draw on interviews with two coffee shop patrons who use laptops in places like Starbucks. My interviews with these two mobile writers shows that they have a strong sense of place and engage in embodied, material practices, using devices to manage private spaces in public. Turning to these various material practices—the uses of spaces and objects—is important, I argue, for exploring the material aspects of the public/private distinction. In the following section, I explain how the public/private distinction is materially practiced and what I mean by materiality: the physical matter of things and their occupation of physical space. From there, I turn to the “discourse of crisis” (Reynolds, Geographies 24) about the loss of public space because of laptop and cell phone users’ “privatization” of those spaces.

I argue that mobile devices like cell phones and laptops do not displace users, but are rather part of embodied practices that involve encountering spaces and places. Space is not an empty container, but is rather created through the relationships of objects and people and their practices. The discourse of crisis that sees mobile devices as destroying coffee shop culture depends on a nostalgia for an idealized public sociality of face-to-face encounters. I turn to Snakes & Lattes as a material site where patrons use both board games and cell phones to interact
with the space, each other, and others elsewhere, before turning to the practices of laptop users in coffee shops. I then turn to the history of coffee shops and the nostalgia for them, showing how from a historical perspective, laptop use might not be that foreign to coffee shops: Cafés have always been sites for conversations mediated through literate activities, sites for secrecy and private spheres, and sites of exclusion. Nostalgia for ideal coffee shop sociality depends on an impossible ideal that was never fully actualized.

This nostalgia depends on a privileging of face-to-face conversation that ignores the embodied and located actual uses of literacy devices and objects. Drawing on Jason Farman’s discussion in Mobile Interface Theory and Shuhei Hosokawa’s 1984 article “The Walkman Effect,” I explore how objects provide imaginative and virtual mobility. The virtual, Farman explains, is not separate from the real, but is actually material practice, “a component of the real” (22). What makes the private spheres created by laptop and cell phone use in public so upsetting to many is not that space is privatized—indeed, private conversation, reading a book, playing a board game at a café all create private spaces—but rather that screens are what Hosokawa calls a “confessed” secret—the virtuals they provide access to are not readily apparent to observers (177).

As Farman notes, it would be shortsighted to understand mobile technologies like cell phones as completely new: Literacy provided mobility as early as the papyrus (1). Anxieties around mobility, virtuality, and secrecy influence fears that we are becoming more and more isolated and that public spaces are dying. But I believe that this anxiety relies on an idealization of certain public spaces as naturally non-mediated, an idealization that further relies on ignoring the mobility and virtuality of other objects. This idealization of coffee shops and cafés is also a privileged nostalgia, privileging the public and social activities of a (real or imagined) past of

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2 “Elsewhere” itself is a common trope amongst scholars of mobile technologies and space, even serving as the title of Chris Berry, Soyoung Kim, and Lynn Spigel’s edited collection Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology and the Experience of Social Space.
privileged white men who congregated in cafés. This privileging harms our ability to look at actual literate and social practices as they play out in public environments. The cell phone and laptop are seen as isolating, rather than as mobile devices that can be used to connect people in various, mediated ways. In the conclusion of this chapter, I turn to the concept of ethos, articulating it as a concept that captures “dwelling-in-motion” (Urry 11) of objects as they are used to build connections between people, objects, and places. A rhetorical approach to the use of mobile devices in material spaces needs to attend to how those objects are used in embodied ways to create relationships and to interact with one’s environment in order or to manage one’s privacy or accessibility.

The Materiality of the Public/Private Distinction

The public/private distinction, like rhetorical and literacy practices, is material practice, involving objects, places, and bodies. Christina Nippert-Eng makes this apparent in her sociological study of privacy, as she shows how objects are used to reveal and disclose information about oneself, and how people protect their private spaces or use objects to create zones of privacy. For example, in her observations of people at a beach, Nippert-Eng explains how people use various objects, like umbrellas, strollers, blankets, and towels for “boundary work” to “demarcate and fill the space, deterring encroachment” (11-13). Christina Haas has also argued that we understand privacy spatially. In “Materializing Public and Private: The Spatialization of Conceptual Categories in Discourses of Abortion,” she explains how the metaphor of “place” used by social theorists and the Supreme Court shows that privacy is understood in spatial terms, as a material space not to be violated. For example, the Supreme Court has increasingly spatialized privacy, defending it in terms of a “zone of privacy” that is protected from government “intrusion” (230-231). Privacy is materially practiced and understood, that is, having to do with objects, places,
and bodies—physical stuff. Even when privacy is understood as abstracted from the body—information encoded in digital databases, for example—violations are still understood and felt as “invasions,” often resulting in strong affective embodied responses.

Another way in which privacy is practiced materially is through understandings, constructions, and uses of spaces and places. Nedra Reynolds argues in *Geographies of Writing* that cell phone use in public spaces is disturbing to people because of their conceptions of space. Because spaces like coffee shops, sidewalks, and airports are understood as public, overhearing private cell phone conversations are seen as annoying or a violation of the public: too much private activity in a public space (22).³ Jenny Edbauer Rice calls the blending of public and private by overheard cell phone conversations a “zone of public intimacy” that “operates through the technical apparatus of overhearing” (“Overhearing” 95). In this “intimate space of betweening,” the traditional distinction between public and private does not fully hold (96). Shifting technological practices in spaces available to all—public spaces in one sense—mean that “public and private are rapidly losing their traditional meanings,” resulting in “a ‘discourse of crisis’ about the loss of public space, in its real or imagined forms” (Reynolds, *Geographies* 22, 24).

Privacy is thus rhetorically and materially practiced in relationship to and with use of objects and spaces. Spaces are understood as private or public depending on prior cultural practice and practices in the moment. We understand coffee shops as public, then, because of historical and cultural practices that make them available to all. However, spaces within a coffee shop can also be private, constructed through the placement of bodies and the use of objects. A table, for instance, becomes a private space within a public coffee shop because of the presence of one or more bodies. Or a large, shared table might have multiple private spaces within it, as

³ Nippert-Eng adds that “Privacy violations occur not only when others intrude into our private territories; they also occur when others force us to enter what we think should be theirs” (14).
patrons are careful to respect each other’s space and not spread materials too broadly on the table or sit too closely to someone else. This facet of privacy is what Susan Gal calls its indexical nature: something is understood as private or public dependent on context and perspective. Gal provides the example of a sidewalk in front of a business: Public from a broad perspective, it is turned into a private space “by indexical gestures” of a shop-owner sweeping it (82).

Spaces, after all, are not simply containers, but are rather produced through relations. Henri Lefebvre explains that space is “a set of relations between things (objects and products)” and “a social reality—that is to say, a set of relations and forms” (83, 116). Private spaces are constructed materially through the use of objects and the creation of relationships. Thus, they are also not fixed, and are permeable: people and objects can enter or join private spaces, reconfiguring them. For example, my work at a coffee shop can be disrupted by a friend joining my table, and we create a new private space through conversation—one we expect others to not enter. Thus, private spaces are also contingent, always up for rearticulation.

Disruptions in the real or imagined practices or expectations of a public or private space lead to anxiety, frustration, anger, or a variety of other emotional responses. And, as Reynolds notes, one cultural response is a discourse of crisis about the loss of public space. The ideals of public spaces are that they should be open to all, and that one’s presence should lead to spontaneous talking to strangers. This is less true for the street (though still a possibility), but more true for coffee shops, bars, airports, and classrooms. Practices with cell phones and laptops disrupt notions of these spaces as public because users highlight through the use of visible objects that they are in a private space.

The creation of these supposedly private spaces—what Ichiyo Habuchi terms a “telecocoon” (3)—are made possibly by and allow for the further development of convergence culture, specifically the convergences of “technologies, practices, and spaces enabled by a variety of technologies” (Papacharissi, The Private Sphere 17). Because of technological innovations,
various technologies afford convergences that bring together objects, technologies, practices, and spaces that were previously viewed as separate. The mobile phone itself is perhaps emblematic of this convergence, as it pulls together phone calls, Web browsing, texting, a camera, social networking apps, games, and even video chatting, into one device (for a further discussion of the convergence of media technologies on mobile phones, see Goggin, chapter 8). But not only are technologies converging, but so are spaces and practices. As mobilities scholar John Urry describes the convergence of spaces, “new social routines are engendering spaces that are ‘in-between’ home, work, and social life” (12). As spaces converge, people begin to do more work-related activities at home or in public, such as the laptop user in a coffee shop. Spaces converge and are reimagined so that various practices also converge, leading to the convergence of work, domestic life, politics, and social activities (Papacharissi, The Private Sphere 18). Because of these convergences in postmodern society, we see more behaviors and activities previously understood as private in some way — writing on a laptop, talking on a cell phone, texting, surfing the Web — as happening in places that were previously understood as public: bars, sidewalks, airports, coffee shops.

A Discourse of Crisis: The Privatization of Public Spaces

These shifts in practices in coffee shops have encouraged discourses of crisis that privilege face-to-face conversations and express scorn or concern about isolated individuals behind screens who have no connection to place and are in “perpetual contact” (Katz and Aakhus 12) with others elsewhere. These concerns express that public spaces are being turned into private ones, harming public sociality. Lyn Lofland describes privatization (or privatism, in her terms) as “the movement of human activity from commonsensically understood ‘public’ space into commonsensically understood ‘private’ space,” or a retreat into the private realm and a
withdrawal from interest in communities, neighborhoods, and acquaintances (143-144). Writing of the intrusion of cell phones in public spaces, *Metropolis Mag* writer Paul Goldberger explains that even if a cell phone doesn’t ring in public and someone is using it quietly, its “great offense” is that “it renders a public place less public. It turns the boulevardier into a sequestered individual, the flaneur into a figure of privacy.” Communication scholar James Katz’s comments featured in *The Economist* in 2008 reveal a similar concern. He fears that mobile workers are “hollowing out” cafés, making them “physically inhabited but psychologically evacuated.” Patrons, he explains, “feel more isolated than they would be if the café were merely empty” (“The New Oasis”).

The mobile phone especially has been called “the privatizing or ‘individualizing’ technology par excellence” because users do not pay attention to co-present others; in effect, cell phones “colonize” the public sphere (Morley 11, 13). Communication scholars Kenneth J. Gergen and Jukka-Pekka Puro also both argue that mobile phones might privatize and isolate people in public (Puro 13; Gergen 227). For Gergen, technologies that allow for interaction with others, such as the telephone and the Internet, allow for further privatization than one-to-many media, such as the television, leading to what he calls “absent presence,” a state in which face-to-face communication is diminished, relationships are more shallow, and meaning is decontextualized from place and everyday life because the user is “absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere” (227, 230-236). This cultural narrative’s central concern is that public spaces are dying and that mobile devices like laptops and cell phones are to blame for creating private zones and a sense of placelessness and absence, a narrative echoed in Turkle’s account earlier in this chapter.

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4 Lofland prefers *privatism* to *privatization*, reserving the latter to economic privatization of previously publicly (that is, governmentally) owned or operated places or services (143, 210-213).
The belief that mobile devices remove us from our locations, make us displaced and unaware of our surroundings, is not limited to scholarly arguments and journalism. It is also exemplified in a joke advertisement for an iPhone app called Ignorify. In an advertisement video posted on YouTube, the developer explains that “there’s no real reason to be bothered by our actual surroundings any longer” as people are walking while texting, taking pictures, and playing games on their phone. The video shows how this parody app detects objects and tells users to step to the side to avoid walking into something or someone. This parody app isn’t alone in tapping into issues of surroundings while on mobile devices, however: other apps actually exist that use mobile phones’ cameras to display surroundings behind a texting interface (Sreenivasan).

These accounts are based in part on an idealized nostalgia for a public sphere that may or may not have ever existed—a specific type of literate, bourgeois coffee shop culture idealized as the central space for democracy. In a way, these narratives depend on an ideology of space that is often counterfactual to actual places. That is, these are theories of what a decontextualized space should be, rather than theories of actual practices in specific places. Put differently, this nostalgia does not understand space as something that is practiced in context, but rather sees spaces as sort of a container for specific types of activities, in this case face-to-face sociality. A place, Tim Creswell explains, is a space that has been given meaning by people, has a specific location, has a “material setting for social relations,” and includes people’s “subjective and emotional attachment” to the site (7). Despite the many historical, cultural, and social forces that go into the meanings of a place, how people use that place is unpredictable, and a place is never a finished site, but always a creation (36-37). Doreen Massey contributes to the complex ecology of places by arguing that a specific place can be understood “as a particular, unique, point of [the] intersection” of social relations, discourses, bodily movements, and experiences (69).

Coffee shops (and other public spaces as well) have been idealized, I argue, as an arhetorical and decontextualized container for public sociability of face-to-face conversations.
But specific places are not simply spaces to be filled by elements. In fact, numerous rhetorical scholars, like Nedra Reynolds, Jenny Edbauer, and John Ackerman, have argued that spaces and places need to be understood rhetorically—and that rhetoric is also spatial. Edbauer explains that a place is “a space of contacts” between bodies and objects that “carry with them the traces and effects from whole fields of culture and social histories” (“Unframing” 10). Ackerman, building on Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, argues “that rhetorical situations have spatial dimensions, and that rhetorical agency includes the production and maintenance of social space” (“The Space for Rhetoric” 85). Adriana de Souza e Silva also draws on Lefebvre to argue that space is a “social product rather than preexisting physical space”; space is “a set of social relationships both between objects and objects and people” (271). Reynolds, Edbauer, Ackerman, and de Souza e Silva inform my analysis of Snakes & Lattes Board Game Café: By attending to the material settings, the social forces that inform its creation, social practices within the space, and the movements of discourses and objects in the space, I explore how objects are still used to create private spaces and how mobile technologies are used in the space in embodied ways that connect the user to the space.

**Snakes & Lattes as a Material Response to “The Air of Isolation”**

Snakes & Lattes Board Game Café opened in August 2010, quickly becoming a huge success in the Koreatown business area of Toronto. Koreatown is situated within the Annex, a neighborhood of Toronto close to the University of Toronto and with a large college student populace. Bloor Street, on which Snakes & Lattes sits, is lined with a variety of businesses, including bakeries, restaurants, coffee shops, and small convenience stores, as well as a school for Korean students. The location is ideal for building a steady customer base: surrounded by college students and easily accessible via public transportation. According to Castanie, roughly 90 percent of the
customers are probably in their 20s, and the customers are of varied racial backgrounds. Castanie says that unlike other businesses in Toronto that he visits, the customers at Snakes & Lattes seem to actually mirror the racial makeup of the streets.

Figure 2-2: The storefront of Snakes & Lattes Board Game Café. (Source: Jennifer Yin, Flickr, Creative Commons, http://www.flickr.com/photos/bittermelon/6102404602/)

Upon entering, customers are greeted by a rather vibrant, colorful setting. On the immediate left is a small seating area, where patrons either wait for a table or play games, and immediately afterward is the counter, where customers order food and drinks and pay for admission. For five dollars, each patron can stay as long as they like, playing a variety of games, typically with their friends who arrive together or meet them there later. Across from the counter is a shelf of games, and past the counter is another shelf, wall-to-ceiling and covering half the wall, filled with thousands of board games. Between the shelving and the opposite brick wall are tables for two or four, and past them on a slightly elevated area is a larger table with three couches and a chair for a larger group. The establishment also includes a basement, which they
open for more games when it’s busier, and in 2011, Castanie and Peynet developed plans to extend Snakes & Lattes into the closed business next door.

A “board game guru” helps patrons pick out a game, usually through recommending one based on the group’s interests and the type of game they might be interested in. He or she often takes ten to twenty minutes to explain how the game works with the group. With walls lined with board games, the options are often overwhelming for customers, unless they already have their favorites. Gurus are well versed in many of them; Castanie explained to me that he hires based on experience and enthusiasm for board games.

Snakes & Lattes opens at 11 in the morning and stays open late—until patrons are finished playing their games, which sometimes runs as late as 5 A.M. On one day I visited in August 2011, I observed patrons showing up near opening and business picked up in the mid-afternoon. At around noon, there were three groups of three or four playing games, and by mid-
afternoon, the establishment was packed. Every table was full, and a group of five was waiting in the front for tables to open up. One guru told me that the place is usually this busy, and a customer chimed in that this is the “only place like this at all.” Many evenings they have to turn customers away because they are so busy, and they take reservations (recorded on an iPad) and call customers when a table opens up.

Game playing varies from the quiet and methodical to the lively and rambunctious, which is to be expected from such a variety of options. Games vary from the traditional, like Monopoly, to games developed fairly recently. Some groups engage in continuous dialogue, either about the game or not, and some groups are fairly quiet, like a group of three women playing Banagrams, who silently played rounds and only chatted while preparing for the next round of play.

The structure of the place seems to encourage a private sociality amongst friends and acquaintances in a public realm, rather than encouraging serendipitous meetings between strangers (an ideal of public spaces). Despite claims in the press that “Anyone who comes in a small group should be prepared to make new friends” (Kupferman), Castanie told me he believes serendipitous encounters are rare. Occasionally, there’s interaction between groups, especially when a group finishes playing a game and asks the people at the table next to them to teach them the rules to their game. But the materiality of the game playing and the set up of tables for two or four people encourages a discrete social activity that makes the assemblages of strangers difficult or rare. While gaming is a social event to engage in with strangers—as Castanie explains, you have something to talk about (the game) rather than the weather or what you did that day—it is not an easy activity to join mid-process like other social activities.

One group I observed and talked to seemed typical of the patrons that Snakes & Lattes attracts. They traveled in from a western suburb of Toronto after learning about Snakes & Lattes from one of their sisters who lived in the neighborhood. I talked with them during their second visit there. While playing Intrigue, a game based on trying to make money by getting other
players to hire your scholars in their academies, the group explained to me that Snakes & Lattes was “definitely a destination.” Initially a group of three—a white heterosexual married couple and their white male friend—they were joined by an Asian Canadian friend who lived in the neighborhood and attended graduate school. They explained that they rarely engage with strangers at Snakes & Lattes or other coffee shops—with the exception of gurus, me, and a reporter who coincidentally asked them questions during the same visit. They expressed that they liked the structure of the place: “You never have to leave. . . . You can stay all day.” During their first visit, they stayed for eight hours.

Philosophy Behind Snakes & Lattes

The idea for Snakes & Lattes came from co-owners Castanie and Peynet’s shared love of board games. As Castanie explained to me, he grew up frequently playing board games with his family. As a kid in France, Castanie and his family would go to toy lending libraries, check out board games, and play them at home. Carrying these fond memories with him, he was inspired when he and Peynet visited Chicago and came across a board game store. They decided that a board game café—what Castanie sees as mixing the “very European” board game and North American coffee shop—would be a great business idea.

While Castanie and Peynet were primarily motivated for their love of board games, they were also motivated by a concern that, as Castanie put it, coffee shops like Starbucks “fucked it up” by having wifi. Instead of a social space, Castanie sees a wifi café as a “passive atmosphere where you basically stay there, do a lot of homework.” He explained, “The last thing we wanted in our café was having people staring at a computer screen with their headset on taking a lot of space.” While he expressed concern about loitering laptop users in cafes, he insists that their decision to ban wifi was “political,” not “business related.” (His claim is bolstered by the fact that
patrons of Snakes & Lattes often spend hours on end there playing games, taking up space that
new patrons could use, which could increase profits. For example, the group I talked to and
discussed earlier spent eight hours there on their first visit. I assume they spent very little, perhaps
getting a second drink. They told me they left at 10 PM: “We had to go eat dinner at some point,”
they explained, meaning they didn’t buy a meal there. A higher rate of customer turnover would
lead to more business, which suggests to me that Castanie’s motivations are in fact more political
than economic.)

Castanie’s philosophy of sociality is decidedly anti-screen and privileges face-to-face
sociality. In his words, he understands “the essence of a social place” as people talking to each
other. Looking at coffee shops with wifi, he asks, “Are people talking to each other?” and
concludes decidedly, “No.” As Castanie sees it, screens in public spaces attract attention,
especially away from face-to-face conversations. Laptops and cell phones are not the only screens
that draw his ire: Televisions are “the worst fucking thing you can do to a bar” because patrons
just stare at the screen, rather than talking to each other. Ultimately, though, a screen is something
“that gets in between people.” In my interview with Castanie, he provided another example:
People who look up information on their smart phones during a discussion: “You have little
arguments and someone, the smartass guy’s like, whoa, I can check in Wikipedia and it takes
fifteen minutes to check it. Well, don’t even bother checking it. We gotta take fifteen minutes. . . .
The whole thing [conversation] is stalled, you know, it’s stuck, so mister can check it.”

He contrasts the sociality of screens with the “simple” sociality of board games and other
social activities involving material objects. “Simple” was a trope throughout our conversation, as
he wanted to make Snakes & Lattes as “simple” as possible, and he values “simple” attempts at
sociality. He views the “more social places” as “going back to the basics,” and describes Snakes
and Lattes as “Board games on a shelf. There’s nothing fancy, there’s no—it’s simple.” He also
praises other attempts at sociality involving screenless material objects, including a knitting café that had recently opened in Toronto, as “pure social time.”

Use of Screens at Snakes & Lattes

Despite Castanie’s aversion to screens, they are ubiquitous at Snakes & Lattes. Wifi is banned, so laptop users are rare, though Castanie did convey that occasionally a laptop user comes in and he has to explain that there is no wifi there. (More accurately, there is no publicly available wifi; wifi is available to staff for work-related purposes.) But during my observations, I noticed that digital cameras and cell phones were commonly used. At times, these digital screens seemed like a distraction from the environment surrounding the user, but more often than not, they were used to connect people across space and to coordinate mobility. For instance, the group I mentioned above used their cell phones to text and coordinate the arrival of their friend who arrived later.

Castanie isn’t a luddite, and he welcomes the use of digital technologies. He himself owns a smart phone, and Snakes & Lattes uses an iPad to coordinate reservations. Snakes & Lattes has a Twitter account, a blog on Tumblr, a website, and a Facebook presence where they post pictures, updates on new games, and advertise events. He also notes that there is a lot on the Internet that he wasn’t aware of because of patrons posting pictures on various sites and commenting on social networking sites about Snakes & Lattes (more on this later). Facebook users also interact with Snakes & Lattes, asking if certain games are available or when a good time to come in is. People are also using social networking sites for meetups at Snakes & Lattes. Various people who only know each other online through different types of groups (for instance, a cancer survivor support group) will meet up at Snakes & Lattes for an in-person social event.

One of Castanie’s concerns when they opened Snakes & Lattes, though, was that customers would be on their cell phones too much. He was “really worried about that,” especially
customers who talked on the phone while ordering, but found that it hasn’t been a big problem (though, interestingly, Castanie did have to ban employees from texting while working). A number of customers do use their cell phones to call their friends and invite them to Snakes & Lattes, Castanie reports.

Despite concerns that screens are separating us, distracting us into electronic elsewheres, they are often tools to mediate face-to-face conversations and relations. While sitting alone one afternoon and observing patrons, I noticed a young woman come in and sit on a couch near me. She pulled out her digital camera and began flipping through pictures. Shortly, a friend of hers arrived, they both ordered tea, and they began to chat with each other. The first woman put away her camera, but eventually pulled it back out and they both perused the images together, chatting in French and using the pictures as topics for conversation.

Concerns that mobile devices are harming sociability often turn to place and concerns about presence. As Turkle explained of the coffee shop she visits, other patrons are there but they are not present. Castanie, in many ways, wants his patrons there, present in conversations and board games. But “presence” is perhaps always evasive and always involves mobility. Patrons use their phones to invite friends or to text and call friends who are not there. For many patrons, their presence at Snakes & Lattes depends on their mobile technology and mobility when they make a reservation. For example, I had a reservation with a few friends for 7 P.M. on a Thursday. We arrived at 7, but because Snakes & Lattes was too busy, we were able to walk around the neighborhood until they called one of our cell phones (unfortunately, they called right as we were sitting down at a Korean restaurant, and we decided to not order and return to Snakes & Lattes).

In addition to using phones for coordinating meeting up with friends, screens still seem to serve other purposes: to pass time and keep one’s attention during idle moments, to share and engage in social activity with friends, and to create documentation to be posted online. During a busy afternoon, I noticed a young woman sitting alone engrossed in her smart phone. When her
friend returned (possibly from the restroom), she told him that she had received many emails. Besides using mobile devices to fill idle time, patrons use them to document experiences for the Internet: checking into Snakes & Lattes on Facebook or Foursquare or taking photographs and posting them on Flickr or the café’s Facebook page; taking video and posting it on YouTube.⁵

In fact, digital evidence shows that the use of smart phones is fairly common at Snakes & Lattes and shows awareness of and engagement in place. By documenting and sharing their experiences on various social networking sites, patrons make their experiences mobile and sharable with others in those networks. In effect, they connect their experiences to various virtual networks, and even extend Snakes & Lattes beyond its brick and mortar boundaries to various digital imaginaries. Consider the digital activities of patrons related to Snakes & Lattes (data as of June, 2012):

- 4,286 people have checked in at Snakes & Lattes on Facebook, meaning that while they were there, they used their smart phones to alert their friends that they were there. Additionally, 8,310 people have liked their Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/snakesandlattes).

- 89 photos posted to Instagram with the hashtag #snakesandlattes, many of which prompt likes from friends and start short conversations in comments to the pictures (see Figure 2-4, an iPhone screen capture of images tagged #snakesandlattes). While all of these were taken with a mobile phone at the location, some are also geotagged at Snakes & Lattes, meaning they were uploaded there.

- 2,238 check-ins at Snakes & Lattes on Foursquare, a location-based app that allows users to “check in” at locations. Foursquare users have also uploaded 73 photos and left over

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⁵ There is a rather humorous moment in one five-minute YouTube video, in which the patrons introduce themselves to the camera. One young woman is so engaged in her smart phone that she does not even realize she is being filmed, and the cameraperson says her name instead. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhuD7K0BjE&feature=related
60 tips, often about the business’s hours, waiting time, and suggested games (https://foursquare.com/v/snakes--lattes/4c7be89283a7bfb7637d8ff8). Yelp, a website for finding and reviewing venues, also has 21 photos uploaded and 69 reviews (http://www.yelp.ca/biz/snakes-and-lattes-toronto).

- Hundreds of photos posted on Flickr that were taken at Snakes & Lattes (the exact number is hard to calculate, as they’re not all tagged “snakes and lattes,” and search results bring up pictures that are unrelated).
- Pictures uploaded to image services that are integrated into Twitter and tweets directed at Snakes & Lattes expressing thanks or inquiring about games (@snakesandlattes has 1,100 followers on Twitter).

I don’t share these numbers because they are staggering, but because they are suggestive of how patrons have used their mobile devices to document, share, and engage in the physical space of Snakes & Lattes. Of course, screens are not as ubiquitous at Snakes & Lattes as at some other public venues, like Starbucks, airports, and sometimes bars (or even some classrooms). And sometimes they are distractions for users. But more often than not, they are used to connect the user to the place, and to connect that place and the self to other electronic elsewheres. That is, these mobile devices highlight the very mobile nature of Snakes & Lattes as a place. Through accessing various virtuals through screens, patrons at Snakes & Lattes are able to mediate their experiences differently, and mediate their relationships. In the next section, I turn to a different use of screens, the use that Castanie is suspicious of: laptop users in coffee shops and cafés.

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6 In fact, the categorization of “co-present” itself might be problematic. Farman notes that the category of “co-present” often facilitates a belief that people use mobile devices to interact with others elsewhere, and then return to their unmediated co-present others. He critiques Rich Ling’s useful analysis of mobile computation’s effects on sociability for “utilizing the opposition between ‘co-present’ and ‘mediated.’” Ling privileges the co-present as “primary engagement,” relegating mobile communication to secondary engages that “mischaracterizes the significantly embodied way we connect over mobile phones” (Farman 99). See Ling, New Tech (102).
Figure 2-4: An iPhone screenshot of pictures uploaded to Instagram using the hashtag #snakesandlattes (taken by author, June 2012)

Writing in the Coffee Shop

The majority of this dissertation was written in coffee shops in State College. Living in a college town, I witness numerous other mobile workers on their laptops at Starbucks, local coffee shops,
and Barnes and Noble. These workers interact with their environments in a variety of ways, including sitting alone at their tables with headphones to block out background noise; sitting in groups, each person typing on his or her laptop or browsing the web mostly in silence; collectively working in groups on a single laptop, discussing a project together; or lazily browsing the web and talking with friends, acquaintances, and strangers throughout their visit.

Mobile workers go to the coffee shops for a variety of reasons, but one of those reasons is the ambience and a space filled with other people: to not be alone as one works on her laptop. As Stacey Pigg describes this sociability in her dissertation on the embodied rhetorical practices of those who write in coffee houses, workers like being surrounded by people who require little social engagement yet provide a continued sense of privacy for their work (75-77). Coffee shops provide people with a sense of anonymity and privacy, yet the presence of others for people watching, occasional conversation, and a shared space. As I overheard one man explain why he was working at Starbucks, he had to go somewhere away from his office, where he would have been distracted by coworkers and not get his work finished.

Laptop practices in coffee shops can vary greatly, as some people are more attached to working alone on their laptop, and others are more interested in interacting with co-present others. In their study of activity in four wifi coffee shops in Seattle and Boston, Keith N. Hampton and Neeti Gupta discovered two general types of wifi users: “true mobiles” and “placemakers.” True mobiles used coffee shops as an environment for their work and a site of productivity and interacted little with co-present others. Drawing on Erving Goffman, Hampton and Gupta explain that for these users, laptops serve as “portable involvement shields,” or props that signal that one does not want overt social interactions (839-841). Placemakers, on the other hand, were not engaged in work, but came to coffee shops to hang out, people watch, and participate with co-present others. The laptop wasn’t their central focus, even as they used it a lot.
Placemakers were more engaged with co-present others and “did not immerse themselves in shielded, private cocoons of interaction” (834-844).

In this section, I turn to interviews I conducted with two graduate students in a college who regularly use coffee shops as environments for their dissertation writing. 7 “Michelle,” a humanities graduate student, often spent time in various Starbucks writing her dissertation or journal articles. Michelle first turned to working in coffee shops because she was living with her parents as an undergraduate, and needed a place to work that was private, away from her parents’ interruptions of her work. “Rebecca,” a graduate student in the hard sciences, spent time in Barnes and Noble and local coffee shops writing her thesis after she had completed most of her lab work and ran out of funding. Rebecca first started writing in coffee shops and cafés because she found it hard to work at her home, which she describes as “a cave,” after her dissertation was over. A friend of hers, a graduate student in the humanities, had started a private Facebook group that encouraged members to share where they were writing so that others could join them. Writing in groups encouraged members to be productive and stay on task.

In contrast to claims such as Turkle’s, Katz’s, and Gergen’s that mobile device users do not have a sense of place—indeed, are dis-placed and absent—and are completely isolated from co-present others, my conversations with Michelle and Rebecca reveal that they do indeed have a strong sense of place. Instead of being dis-placed, Michelle and Rebecca use their laptops and other devices strategically to manage their privacy—both a private space away from interruptions of co-present others, but also a private space away from interruptions of non-present others. And rather than being fully isolated from co-present others, both Michelle and Rebecca experience interactions with others—though typically with friends who are sharing their space or with friends who developed over a period of time sharing a coffee shop. In this way, Michelle and Rebecca use the public venue of coffee shops to create multiple private spaces: the private space

7 Names are pseudonyms.
of their workspace and private spaces with co-present others that involve either just their presence or conversations (both face-to-face and via instant messenger on laptops). Their material practices with their laptops represent the sort of practices that Farman describes as embodied, producing and experiencing space “as a collaborating between information, representation, and materiality” (13).

A large draw of coffee shops for both Michelle and Rebecca was the atmosphere that was free of the distractions of home or the messy work environment of the office. Michelle describes Starbucks as having a “neutral landscape” and being a “perfect non-offensive workspace for the greatest number of people” in contrast to too many distractions at home, including television, books, food, and family members. Starbucks’s “neutral landscape” includes décor. For example, she told me, “These kind of institutional paintings that are just shit art are really good for ignoring.” Not only are the material surroundings important, but other people are too. They are a welcome distraction for Michelle, as she enjoys people watching and listening to others’ conversations. Public spaces provide “this tacit agreement that you’re also fair game to look at and watch,” and these distractions also focus her attention. People and objects assemble into an ideal workspace. She describes one Starbucks she sometimes works at in the evenings: “I really enjoy the atmosphere of that one at night. . . . I feel like everyone’s mellow. Everyone is—they’re all there just to do their work and hang out, and there’s not this sense of urgency that there is in the morning and the day.”

Coffee shops not only provide consistency of a neutral landscape, they can provide difference and changes in atmospheres. One reason Rebecca enjoyed working at coffee shops instead of at home and found herself more productive was “that it was new.” While she could develop a routine of driving to the coffee shop, meeting her friends, ordering the same food and drink, and sitting at the same table in some circumstances, she still craved newness and found that she appreciated the “customization” of going to various different coffee shops. The benefit of
working at a coffee shop for Rebecca was the “freedom to create an idealized work place for whatever you need it to be.” In additional to the material surroundings, the surrounding people (often fellow graduate students) were important to her. Coffee shops are useful for Rebecca because “We’re social beings,” she explained. “I think there’s something about knowing that there’s another human in proximity. Preferably another human who is also working hard that you can sort of feed off that.”

Regular patrons of the same coffee shop typically see the same regulars after a period of time. Michelle is no exception to this. When she began working in a coffee shop as an undergraduate in her early 20s, she began seeing the same people frequent the coffee shop. Because she had recently relocated, her social circle was small, and she “had to rebuild that friend list up.” She explained to me that she started seeing the same people at the coffee shop, “and eventually it gets stupid, because, you know, you see these people every single day, pretty much, and you don’t know each other. It’s ridiculous. So finally I just broke down and I said, ‘I’m [Michelle]’ to this one guy.” Working on her laptop at a café became “the gateway to a social event” for Michelle, as she began to become friends with other patrons of the café and then go to other social events with them after working in the café.

Rebecca’s experiences differ from Michelle’s, because Rebecca began going to coffee shops with other graduate students she already knew. In fact, this helped her to work because being around other writers gave a sense of “accountability” from “this sort of external social human presence that was really baring down on you.” While Rebecca and her friends tried to work as much as possible, they would take breaks to discuss their research, or they would use instant message to chat online, particularly about the people around them. Particularly, distracting people were useful topoi for conversation, because by calling attention to someone that was distracting, they could acknowledge the distraction and then return focus to work. For example, Rebecca once noticed a “creepy old man” staring at her and her female friend while pretending to
read on his Nook and chatted with her friend online about it. By having a private conversation through instant messenger, they could chat about “things you can’t vocalize because it’s impolite,” “acknowledge that [an] event is going on,” and then return to work. In these instances, Rebecca and her friend were able to use their laptops to communicate about their surroundings and to manage their social privacy (having a private conversation in a public space). For Rebecca and Michelle, then, their practices with their laptops in coffee shops are not fully separate from their practices in the space itself. They are very much material practices embodied in the spaces they are using. Rebecca described the meticulous way she organized her space: Her laptop in front of her and plugged into the wall, her phone upside down beside it (so that she is less tempted to get distracted by it), her iPod sitting on top of her cell phone and connected to her laptop if it needs to charge, headphones so she can listen to music. Everything is “sort of analytically neat and structured” for her. The placement of her physical devices in this material setting matter for her productivity and her embodied experience. Her and others’ use of the group on Facebook is an example of this embodied media practice as well. Both Rebecca and Michelle explained that they spend their first ten or twenty minutes at a café on social networking sites or other websites before they start working. Part of Rebecca and her fellow writers’ practices involved posting on their Facebook group where they were working, a practice similar to what Adriana de Souza e Silva describes as “social interface”: “a digital device that intermediates relationships between two or more users. . . . [that] not only reshape communication relationships but also reshape the space in which this interaction takes place (261-262). de Souza e Silva argues against the supposed disconnect between physical and digital spaces, arguing that mobile phones create a “hybrid space” that involves “a more dynamic relationship with the Internet, embedding it in outdoor, everyday activities” (262). Similarly, Rebecca’s practices with her laptop evidence a blurring of physical and digital environments: They are separate and distinct, but co-involved in her literacy and media practices.
Michelle and Rebecca’s practices show that their presence is not “absent” as Gergen claims, or “psychologically evacuated” and “isolated” as Katz claims (Gergen 227; “The New Oasis”). In fact, Michelle explained to me her rhetorical activity of “reading” an establishment, showing that when she visits a coffee shop, she is incredibly aware of the place. Using a coffee shop is a sort of rhetorical reading habit for Michelle, including interpreting others’ behaviors to know if a seat will become available, an ability “to know the terrain” as she put it. She described looking for material and nonverbal cues to know if tables will be available soon when it’s busy:

You have to be able to read the clientele. Are they business people who are going to leave as soon as their interview is over, or are they young mothers who want to get out of the house, you know, but don’t have the energy to do anything except sip coffee. Or, are they friends meeting just to catch up, things like that. Or do you have mostly people who are working, who are there and who are going to be there for five hours. So the more mugs you see, the less likely you are to get the seat. So if you look around and you see everyone with a laptop plugged in, and them all with coffee mugs, it’s over. You’re not going to get a seat.

Not only does Michelle read the space for if a seat will become available soon, but she also explained that there are conventions to reading the space. She complained to me about those “who don’t know how to read the rules” and take tables next to outlets when they are not on laptops. Part of her interpretation of space involves selecting a table that meets her needs and interferes the least with others’ needs. If her laptop is fully charged, she doesn’t take a seat near an outlet.

Michelle may be more considerate of space than others, and perhaps expects others to cohere to her media ideology about laptop use and the conventions of space. In chapter one, I introduced Ilana Gershon’s discussion of media ideologies, the various and conflicting understandings and practices people share (or don’t share) through mutually developed
conventions around media technologies. Michelle’s complaint about others not reading the space as she does shows a conflict in practices and understandings of space. Michelle’s concerns that others do not understand how to situate themselves in a space in relation to plug-ins shows that she and other patrons understand and practice space differently. For her, a café is utilized by a variety of patrons who should situate themselves with awareness of what other patrons might need. She explains that space is a second economy with a much more scarcity than the primary economic economy of a coffee shop. But others understand and practice the space differently, not attending to the material cues, like outlets, that Michelle finds valuable. They have different ideologies and idioms of practice for a coffee shop. For those who are concerned about mobile workers in coffee shops, their media ideologies conflict with Michelle’s: She sees a café as space for working, while others value it for face-to-face sociality. It is this conflict in understanding space—differing media ideologies—that leads to discourses of crisis that public spaces like coffee shops are dying and that laptops and cell phones “colonize” the public sphere (Morley 13).

In the next section, I turn to a certain media and place ideology, that of the coffee shop as an ideal third space of public sociality, and argue that nostalgia for these types of ideal spaces not only informs the discourses of crisis about dying public spaces, but also makes it more difficult to situate actual media practices. Actual media practices are rejected out of hand as altering the space, instead of investigated as actual practices.

**Nostalgia and Privileged Publics of the Coffee Shop**

Coffee and conversation go together in the public imagination so strongly that Markman Ellis notes it’s “now a commonplace that does not need repeating” (“An Introduction” 156). The historical ideal of the coffee shop, recounted by Jürgen Habermas, Terry Eagleton, Richard Sennett, and others explains the rise of the coffee house as a social institution in the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries in Britain and France. Habermas explains the coffee shop of that era as an inclusive space of reasoned, rational debate about issues of public concern (32-33). Eagleton also chronicles the ideal of the British coffee house, where heterogeneous groups of men gathered, exchanged opinions, and formed political norms of rational debate (13-15). Importantly, speech is central to these narratives: Sennett writes that “speech flourished” and patrons “had a right to talk to anyone else, to enter into any conversation” (81).

These narratives are not only academic, but also important to popular understandings of coffee shops. As a writer in coffee shops, I have had numerous conversations (particularly in college towns) about how coffee shops used to be a place of public conversation and sociality but are now full of laptop users sitting alone. Notably, most of the writers I just mentioned write of the decline of public spaces. The accounts hold that these spaces have died out, that public spaces are no longer utilized in the same idealized, communitarian or social ways as the past.

Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place* theorizes “third spaces,” which he understands as public spaces where people meet outside the “first places” of the home and “second places” of work: Meetings are often unplanned and involve public or semi-public sociality. However, because of suburban commutes and malls, which are alienating and anonymous, Oldenburg sees a declining use of third spaces (4-8). Likewise, Richard Putnam laments the decline in social organizations and the use of social spaces in *Bowling Alone*, blaming television in part for this decline in public sociality. New communication technologies are often blamed for this decline in sociability; since face-to-face conversation is so central to the ideal of the coffee house as public space, anything that impedes this ideal is a danger. As Oldenburg puts it, “Whatever interrupts conversation’s lively flow is ruinous to third place, be it a bore, a horde of barbaric college students, or mechanical or electronic gadgetry” (30). Oldenburg writes before the rise of information technologies like laptops and cell phones, but ultimately, technologies interfere with this ideal face-to-face sociability.
For my purposes here, I am less interested in the factuality of this decline in public sociality or the historical reasons for the decline. Instead, I am interested in highlighting three factors that get lost in the popular narrative about coffee shops as an ideal public space: First, in the historical development of coffee shops, face-to-face conversation was mediated by print literature, making coffee shops always a place of multimodal literacy practices. Second, these coffee shops were never fully public, but depended on the historical development of private, secret societies. Third, and relatedly, these spaces were not open to anyone, but were still sites of exclusion, and in fact, through their mediated practices, created norms that led to exclusion. Importantly, by ignoring these three factors, those feelings of nostalgia for coffee shops as the ideal public sociality of face-to-face conversation privilege certain types of public discourse as ideal and ignores the practices of other mediated sociality in public spaces.

Viewing narratives about an idealized past of public sociality in coffee shops as nostalgia is helpful, not in seeing them as fully wrong, but in seeing them as partial and privileging of certain behaviors. Johndan Johnson-Eilola explains how nostalgia imagines a past that it wants to project into the future:

> Nostalgias are ideological—not in the sense of false consciousness, but of necessarily partial and conflictual representations of social reality. In tracing that longing, we find we want not so much the past itself as what our image of the past projected our future to be. In other words, we recall a constructed history, and then place ourselves in that history imagining our future. (*Nostalgic Angels* 176)

In many ways, those who see laptops in coffee shops as destroying an ideal coffee shop sociability imagine a constructed past and place themselves in a historical trajectory that sees the introduction of mobile technologies in public spaces as disrupting our progress toward a better public sphere of ideal face-to-face conversation. Often nostalgia is in response to sociality of the
times: in this case, a (supposed) breaking down of social cohesion represented in the third space of coffee shops.

Popular and scholarly understandings about coffee shop sociability would have it that face-to-face conversations in coffee shops are an ideal that are natural and unmediated. But historically, the coffee shop developed as a highly mediated social space based on print literacy and involved a manufactured sociability. Ellis explains that the model of coffee shop sociability has become “central to theories about the city and public culture,” but this sociability was a rhetorically manufactured endeavor (“The Devil’s”). For example, although essays in the eighteenth century English periodical *The Spectator* claim to report on social behavior in the coffee houses, Ellis explains how these essays manufactured this sociability, promoting a place where heterogeneous men come together to engage in polite debate (*The Coffee-House* 194-196). Coffee shops developed as a *literate site*, a site whose sociability was mediated by the presence of—including the writing of and reading of—developing periodical literature at the time. Ellis explains that surviving drawings from early coffee shops show men “drinking coffee, of course, but also smoking their pipes, reading news-sheets and books, writing in their notebooks and staring off into space” (“An Introduction” 158). Thus, the ideal of coffee shop sociability, imagined as unmediated face-to-face conversation, is based on a historical actuality of a mediated sociability manufactured through a reading and writing public that privileged certain styles of discourses over others.

Besides ignoring how multimodal literate activities were central to the development and manufacturing of ideal coffee shop sociability—that is, the sociability is not unmediated—nostalgia for coffee shops also ignores how they have always been sites of exclusion and private sociability. That the bourgeois public sphere was exclusive was recognized by Habermas, whose account is admittedly about the unrealized ideals of inclusion, not about inclusion and exclusion itself (36). Most notably, early coffee shops were not nearly as open to women as they were to
men (Ellis, “An Introduction” 162; Fraser 73). But further than just exclusion, coffee shop sociality was dependent on secrecy. In fact, we might say, following Jodi Dean, that the ideas of publicity arose out of the possibility of secret gatherings. In Habermas’s account of the development of the public sphere, private citizens met in salons and coffee houses to discuss political issues of the day, but they did not do so in full openness. Instead, conversations were “both intimate and private” (Ellis, “The Devil’s”). Dean explains that “Habermas includes in his account of salons and coffeehouses the secret societies typical of Freemasonry” (29). In the monarchical state, for debate and deliberation to occur, it had to occur behind closed doors: in Freemasons’ lodges, in coffee houses, and in salons. Dean summarizes Habermas’s account of these secret locations: “For Habermas, secret societies were proto-publics. Secrecy was a condition for the publicity of reason.” In order to protect the liberties and rights of people, discourse “depended on being hidden. . . . Private people came together as a public in secret” (30). The ideal of the public coffee shop, then, developed in part out of the secrecy of meeting in coffee shops and Freemason lodges.

The ideal of the coffee shop as the site of ideal public face-to-face sociality is complicated, then, by historical complexities that show how conversations were mediated through literacy, how the manufactured nature of norms created exclusion, and how the concept of publicity developed from the private and secret meetings that happened in coffee shops. In a sense then, coffee shops have always been material settings for reading, writing, and private activities.

While laptop users often disrupt nostalgia for the ideal of a public coffee shop of face-to-face sociality, they in many ways fit into a historical lineage of coffee shops as a literate site of secret activities. As I will explain in the next section, part of the anxiety toward laptop users is that users are behind screens, that their activity is a “confessed” secret: Users admit openly that they are doing things that others cannot see. This secret behavior confronts the ideals of a public
space. Part of Dean’s point in discussing Habermas’s historical account is to show a historical shift in how publicity became an ideal and “norm embodying the rightness of the demand to disclose, a norm premised on the suspicion of the hidden” (33). If the expected norm is to disclose, then openly confessing you have a secret but not disclosing the contents of that secret becomes a violation of publicity.

**Mobile Devices, Virtual Movements in Secret**

As I discussed this project with various friends and colleagues, I was often asked about the difference between using a laptop or smart phone and reading a book in a public space. Certainly, the use of both marks a closing off from co-present others. A book signals, perhaps even more than a laptop, that you are engaged elsewhere, that you do not want to be bothered. Castanie also sees books as similar to laptops and smart phones. Acknowledging that “reading has a better reputation than computing,” he says, “It’s the same thing eventually. It’s very antisocial behavior.” He explained that perhaps reading print books has a better reputation than using laptops and cell phones in coffee shops because of the belief that it’s “more cognitive” and that books have “been around for thousands of years so no one says anything anymore. And we’re supposed to read. You know, our parents told us, read more.”

How, then, might we understand the different responses to book reading and laptop or cell phone use in public? I argue that the difference hinges on multiple factors. Certainly among them is the ways in which book reading is valued as literacy par excellence and is thus more acceptable than other literacy practices. But also important is what I will call the *secrecy of multiplying virtuals*. Book reading, while creating a zone of privacy, is also publicly visible: Because of book covers, we can see what someone is reading in public, and the cover itself can invite in others for a conversation (sometimes unwelcome, but possibly welcome if the
conversation centers on the book or a related topic). Screens, however, promote secrecy: We cannot see what is behind a screen, what virtual worlds a user is interfacing with.

The response to mobile devices in this century is similar to the response to the Walkman, Sony’s portable audio cassette player, in the 1980s. Let me turn to Shuhei Hosokawa’s 1984 article on “The Walkman Effect” and Drew Hemmet’s application of Hosokawa’s argument to mobile devices in order to theorize the virtual, mobile, and secret aspects of mobile devices. Hosokawa sought to confront the narrative of the isolated Walkman user, who supposedly is too autonomous, “suffering from incommunicability” and “self-enclosure” (165). By exploring the “Walkman as urban strategy,” Hosokawa argues that the Walkman user is “not necessary detached (‘alienated’ to use a value-laden term) from the environment, closing their ears, but are unified in the autonomous and singular moment—neither as persons nor as individuals—with the real” (170). That is, the Walkman user is not suffering from hyper-individualism, but is rather engaged in impersonal relations with her surroundings. The “isolation” of a Walkman user is not hermetically sealed, but is constantly “punctured” and mixed with different acts, showing a connection to place and context (Hemment 34-35). In applying Hosokawa’s conceptualization of the Walkman user to mobile devices, Hemment argues that the “distance” that separates a mobile device user and the world is not negative: It is “productive, a positive distance” (35) that isn’t disengaged, but is rather, “relationality, and it is in this relationality, in the overlapping of the discontinuous spaces, that new kinds of meaning and new kinds of sociality can emerge” (36). Hemment summarizes Hosokawa’s argument about the Walkman user’s relationship to the world: “The Walkman user’s isolation represents not a hermetic seal, but rather a membrane through which the world is encountered and the user’s relationship to other users and to the world is acted out. The Walkman is simultaneously boundary and interface, modulating the way the world is encountered and making possible encounters of a wholly new kind” (36). Walkmans, like mobile
devices, serve as a way to encounter the world, not close oneself off from it, and create zones of privacy or autonomy that are never fully separated from others, but rather permeable.

Another aspect that connects the Walkman user to the mobile device user is the visibility of secrets. Hosokawa explains that “What surprised people when they saw the Walkman for the first time in their cities was the evident fact that they could know whether the Walkman user was listening to something, but not what he was listening to” (177). The Walkman represented an open secret, the first time in history “in which a passer-by ‘confessed’ that he had a secret in such a distinct and obvious way” (177). The Walkman, as a “fashion for secrecy,” allowed for users to “communicate through the form—not the content—of the secret” with each other (177-178). In a similar way, mobile phone users, laptop users, and even readers of Kindles and Nooks, have an open secret: They advertise openly to others that they are engaged in something, but others cannot know what they are engaged in. This differs from other literate activities conducted in public spaces: I can know what book you are reading by the cover (generally), or that you are reading a newspaper or magazine. Laptop users can bond, even just through the use of a shared space, through the shared secret: It matters not what the content of that secret is (I don’t care what you’re working on), only that all the laptop users share this secret.

So mobile screens differ from books, newspapers, and magazines in that there is a publicly confessed secret, but also in that the virtual worlds behind those secrets multiply. In the vernacular, we like to think of virtual as not real, but instead we might understand the virtual as an aspect of the real. Byron Hawk and David Rieder argue that the virtual is “a tacit aspect of material reality and potentiality.” In their introduction to the collection Small Tech, they explain that “handheld devices connect to fixed devices embedded in material context and participate in complex ecologies” (xvi). Jason Farman’s recent work on mobile technologies and ubiquitous computing is helpful, as he explains that virtual and real are not dichotomous. Instead, Farman advocates understanding the virtual as in fact material. The virtual is instead part of reality, what
Farman explains as “an experience of multiplicity. It is an experience of layering, and the constant interplay that bonds the virtual and the actual together is the pleasure of virtuality” (38). The virtual and the actual are at play with each other in our everyday lives, as the virtual “is already an integral part of the ways we have always experienced the actual” (39). The virtual is that which is ideal, imagined, or elsewhere, and is always integrated into our material practices: “From our interfaces to our imaginations, the virtual and the ‘realized’ have historically been tandem and complementary elements of our experiences of everyday life” (39).

Understanding the virtual and the real as not opposed, but as part of our everyday life helps us to historicize mobile computing devices a bit and provide a framework for the cultural anxiety produced by mobile devices when it comes to public spaces. We might chronicle a long list of “mobile devices” that allowed for virtuality and mobility: pocket watches, Walkmans, books, notebooks, cigarettes, *The Spectator* in eighteenth century England—even board games. These mobile devices and media allowed and continue to allow for users to imagine time and space differently—to engage in the virtual that is also at once a part of the real. As Carolyn Miller explains, “Books, after all, are simulations, no less than MUD environments” (“Writing in a Culture of Simulation” 272). By providing access to the virtual, they also allow for the management and creation of private spaces and moments.

The cigarette provides a useful example of what I mean by using mobile objects to access the virtual and imagine and actualize private spaces. By drawing this comparison, I am not saying that mobile screens function the same as other less technologically advanced objects. Rather, I am saying there are similarities in creating and actualizing a virtual and creating zones of privacy. A cigarette can of course have multiple purposes in various contexts, but often it can be used to rearrange social situations, especially now that smoking is not allowed in many indoor

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8 According to Jon Agar, the pocket watch might serve as a better serve as a genealogical ancestor to the mobile phone than landline phones do, as they allowed for shifts in understanding time and space (cited in Farman 3).
establishments. When I’m in an uncomfortable situation, feel awkward at a bar or party, or am bored by a conversation, I’ll use my smoking habit as an excuse to leave: I’ll excuse myself and step outside. My smoking habit provides a virtual (an imagined) reality and the cigarette as a mobile object provides me a way to actualize that by creating a zone of privacy away from the social situation I am evading. Of course, this zone of privacy is not impermeable: Others may follow me outside, or I might be joined by other smokers. And of course, there is the possibility my personal solitude might be “invaded” by a stranger asking to bum a cigarette or borrow my lighter.

Objects then, are used to manage privacy in various ways, and are never fully successful, as others can choose to enter a zone of privacy by asking how you like a book, if they can borrow a cigarette, what time it is, or any sort of conversation starter. Some of these disruptions are annoyances, but others become serendipitous moments of enjoyment.

The difference between “old media” objects like a cigarette, print book, or watch, and “new media” objects like cell phones, laptops, or Kindles, is the open secrecy of the virtual, and the production of multiple virtuals. Farman notes that mobile devices like smart phones allow for experiencing the world “in a way that transforms our everyday experience of space into an experience of multiplicity, the production of virtual space is with us on seemingly unprecedented levels” (39).

That virtuals multiply in mobile screens and allow for secrecy is perhaps encapsulated in cartoonist and graphic designer Tom Pappalardo’s complaint that convergent technologies and smaller technologies make it harder to depict activities and content in cartoons. On his blog in 2011, Pappalardo complained that these devices make it harder to represent what a character is doing. For example, a newspaper can be drawn simply to show that a character is outraged at what he’s reading in a newspaper, but it’s not as easy to represent a character angry at a newspaper article while reading on an iPad. Reproduced as Figure 2-5, his drawing of a woman
holding a mobile phone reveals this anxiety, as the caption reads: “I could be watching a YouTube video or using GPS or playing Angry Birds, but this box lets you know that I’m actually texting someone. Or maybe I’m reading a text from someone else. It sort of depends on whether you think my thumbs are moving or not” (Pappalardo).

**People interacting with multi-purpose devices aren’t doing anything**

Figure 2-5: Tom Pappalardo’s cartoon exhibiting how difficult it is to display (and thus know) what someone is doing behind a screen (Source: Pappalardo)

I have called objects like cigarettes, books, board games, pocket watches, and others mobile devices to highlight the similarities between them and mobile devices with screens (cell phones, laptops, Kindles, and so forth): They allow us to access the virtual, an imagined or ideal that is still part of the real, and they allow for mobile use and movement. John Urry’s
categorization of five different and interdependent types of mobility is helpful in understanding the various types of mobility these objects make possible: 1) the movement of corporeal human bodies; 2) the movement of objects between and among people and locations; 3) imaginative movement made possible by both print and visual media; 4) virtual movement in real time that transcends distance; and 5) communicative movement that involves person-to-person communication via media technologies—whether print letters, SMS messages, email, or other technologies (47). (In this section, I have largely conflated Urry’s distinction between imaginative and virtual mobility.) Mobile devices—both old and new—allow for one or more of these types of mobility, to a greater or lesser extent.

We might imagine a continuum of responses to mobile objects and the movements they make possible, whether those movements are imaginative or virtual in Urry’s categories. In Table 2-1 below, I have provided a continuum from the least mediated to the most mediated. In face-to-face conversations that are relatively low mediated, people still drift away from the conversation in their imagination, a virtual or imaginative mobility that can often go unnoticed. Old media objects provide virtual mobility, but because of their apparent presence and obviousness, that virtual can be witnessed or guessed at: A book cover tells others where someone else is, for example, in the imaginative elsewhere of The Hunger Games. But for “new media” objects with screens, there is a confessed secret of virtual movement, and virtuals multiply—a user could be “anywhere,” emailing, texting, using Facebook, writing a paper, chatting on IM, watching YouTube videos, etc., or even moving between these actions.
Table 2-1: A Heuristic for Responses to Virtual Mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtual</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The mind, unassembled with an object</td>
<td>The virtual can go unnoticed or be ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old media object</td>
<td>The virtual can be witnessed or guessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples: print book, magazine, newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New media object</td>
<td>The virtuals multiply and are secret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples: laptop, cell phone, tablet device, e-book reader, iPod, Walkman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objects that are used to create zones of privacy that defy our expectations of publicness, that “confess” a secret, are met with discourses of crisis: Our public spaces are being privatized, being lost. But other zones of privacy in public spaces are not met with the same response: No one is dismayed by other private spaces created in coffee shops through the placement of bodies (except when those private spaces are too permeable, and allow us into a conversation that seems too private). The open secret that someone is elsewhere, accessing some other virtual(s), raises concerns that they are dis-located, not engaged in their surroundings. But users practices with their devices are strongly located in place, embodied, and the virtual is very much party of reality.

In my conclusion, I turn to understanding the use of these devices as a type of ethos, as a way that objects and people move and dwell together in order to assemble to build relationships between people and objects.

**Conclusion: The Ethos of Objects in Public and Private Spaces**

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the narrative that mobile device users are isolated and have no sense of place, and argued that instead, we might understand their use of devices as still
grounded in place but raising anxieties because of the “confessed” secret of virtual movements. Certainly, users do create private zones, but this does not mean they are unaware of their environments. Nedra Reynolds’s study of cell phone users in public corroborates this argument, as she explains that “people seem less attentive to their surroundings when they are engaged in conversation or trying to dial a number,” but, “users are very much aware of where they are,” as they frequently report on where they are in conversations (Geographies 23). I am not denying that focus may be disrupted (we have all probably experienced a friend who ignored us as they did something on their cell phone). Rather, these zones of privacy that people create with their devices are not cut off from their surroundings.

In this conclusion, I want to turn to considering more fully how people use objects to create private zones and to connect with others, either co-present or over distance. Drawing on Urry’s concept of “dwelling-in-motion,” I develop an understanding of ethos as dwelling-in-motion and as the use of objects to build relationships with others. Urry uses the concept “dwelling-in-motion” to theorize the relationship between the mobile citizen and place. Urry’s concept is meant to describe the physical body that is always embodied and to emphasize the productive nature of traveling, rather than minimize travel as “wasted dead time” (11). I find Urry’s concept useful in theorizing a type of ethos—the use of objects to build relationships and make connections—because it focuses on how movement is not a useless or trivial enterprise, but rather involves dwelling and is still tied to senses of place and materiality.9

Rhetoric scholars have turned to understanding ethos as dwelling, drawing on the ancient Greek concept’s roots in place. Nedra Reynolds, S. Michael Halloran, and Risa Applegarth have been especially helpful in exploring the relationships between place and ethos. Halloran notes that the Greek origins of ethos connotes “a habitual gathering place,” wherein people gather in public,

9 I am influenced here by Alex Reid’s blog post, “Ethos and the Reputation Economy,” in which he articulates understanding ethos as “a concept that attempts to explain how relations among objects emerge.”
share experiences, and develop a shared *ethos* in the community (60). Reynolds too understands *ethos* as tied to location, stating that it “refers to the social context surrounding the solitary rhetor” (“Ethos as Location” 327). Linking *ethos* to its Greek roots of “habit, custom, and character,” and “haunts or abodes of animals” (327, 328), Reynolds asks rhetoricians to think of “dwelling” as “‘inhabiting’ discursive spaces” and “to revisit the connections between habits and places, between memories and places, between our bodies and the material world” (Geographies 141). Applegarth summarizes the relationship between *ethos* and place: “As simultaneously a spatial and social concept, *ethos* is a situated practice, neither fully and freely chosen nor yet thoroughly determined, but shaped through the interaction between individual rhetors and the social and material environments within which they speak” (49).

My understanding of *ethos* as “dwelling-in-motion” is meant to build on the dwelling highlighted by Halloran, Reynolds, and Applegarth but to also highlight the ways that objects are used to provide mobility—mobility of communication through space and time, mobility of the imagination, mobility into various virtuals, and mobility in a space and between spaces—and how those objects allow for relationships to develop or to be closed off. “Dwelling” might imply a resistance to movement, and Reynolds shows such aversion when she writes, “travel metaphors and the rhetoric of mobility leave the materiality of place unexamined” (40). For her, “dwelling” is a necessary metaphor and set of practices necessary so that we can “resist the attraction—in theories, discourses, and images of postmodernism—to movement and travel and being on the go” (141). While I find Reynolds’s critique of travel metaphors and boundary metaphors useful (they often do, as she points out, ignore materiality and privilege [38-42]), I think it’s useful to explore how mobility is still tied to place and material objects. Instead of seeing dwelling and movement as antithetical, we might understand them as complementary and dependent upon each other. Farman explains that “Dwelling is an active engagement with your surroundings and the
people and objects within those surroundings. Instead of being the absence of movement, dwelling is the practice of a particular kind of movement” (140).

We might return to Snakes & Lattes to explain this phenomenon, not with mobile technologies like cell phones, but with board games. Games are an integral part to how relations are mediated in Snakes & Lattes. Contrary to the ideal of unmediated face-to-face encounters, board games serve to bring people together in these spaces. In fact, I would say that’s what’s so laudatory about the space: not that it attempts to reproduce the difficult ideal of bringing strangers together in a coffee shop, but that the space uses objects materially and rhetorically to bring people together in a social space. Spaces, both private and public, are constructed through the assemblages of objects and people. Objects help to create spaces, to build relations and help them to emerge. And they do so in part because of their mobility, providing access to imaginative and virtual spaces that are sometimes shared, sometimes solitary, but always grounded in material reality.

To provide an example that pulls together mobile technologies and “secret” discourses in public spaces, I would like to turn to locative media and a site different from coffee shops: a bar. While discussing this project with a colleague at a conference, he suggested that perhaps I was looking at the wrong cultural site (coffee shops) and instead should be investigating bars and how people are glued to their cell phones in bars, closing themselves off from each other. He speculated, and I agree, that part of the tendency of people to turn to their cell phones in public spaces is to build a wall of privacy in order to protect their vulnerability. They do not want to be alone or seen as alone, so they turn to their mobile screens. (Again, I would highlight how this activity shows how users are indeed aware of place and space: They are using their mobile devices as “an interface that helps them select and control their interactions with public spaces” through interacting with some aspects of space and ignoring other aspects of the space [de Souza e Silva and Frith 506].)
But the activity of protecting oneself with a cell phone is not the only activity we might witness in bars. Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted how the nostalgia for coffee shops as public sociality is a privileged nostalgia, one that idealizes the history of certain people’s (white bourgeois) public discourse and ignores the actual practices of a variety of others. Julie Lindquist’s book *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar* is an exploration of a public site that is often un-privileged, and various scholars have looked to public discourse, publics, and public sociality that would go unnoticed in nostalgia for ideal coffee shop sociability. Looking at actual practices in coffee shops, I argue in this chapter, highlights the ways in which people actually use devices to create zones of privacy while still being aware of place, and how they use devices to connect with co-present others and those separated by distance by accessing various virtuals.

Scholars of rhetoric might then look to how users of mobile devices connect with others and create zones of privacy in specific locations, and how these devices serve as *ethos* for creating relationships with other people and with objects. Rather than just looking at sites that have already been privileged for public sociability, as I have done with coffee shops, we might turn to other locations. For example, one night at a gay bar I frequent a group of us were gathered, each holding our iPhones or Android phones. From a distance, it might appear that we were all alienated from our location, each focusing on our screens and electronic elsewheres. In the “confessed secret” of our use of screens, though, we were each logged into the location-based dating application Grindr, which shows nearby men who use the app looking for dates, friends, or casual sexual encounters. A few of us had recently read Alex Rowlson’s critique of Grindr culture in *Fab Magazine*, where he argues that services like Grindr facilitate racism and sexual exclusion based on race (users often list that they are explicitly *not* interested in certain raced bodies). Our mutual activities behind our screens became the launching ground for a lively conversation about how race and racism functions in gay cultures, in sexual desire, and in hookup culture. This sort
of conversation in a public space is facilitated by the secrecy of screens. Our own private activities were brought together by shared experiences, by the use of mobile devices, to lead a productive and fascinating conversation about the political realities of race and desire.

Our private spheres created by mobile devices are no so closed off as to be “absent.” Rather, they are permeable, location-based, and mobile. Gergen’s concern that mobile phones lead us to be “absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere” to the point of being “rendered absent” seems to be off-based. He is concerned that electronic communication allows users to “float free from their moorings in everyday life” so that we are less connected to our endogenous relationships and more connected to exogenous sources (235). With the convergence of various new technologies and media on smart phones, Gergen worries, we might see the intensification of this “absent presence of the exogenous variety” (240). Instead, I would speculate, we might be seeing a strengthening of ties to place because of the development of locative media that allow users to connect to place even more strongly and to customize their experiences of spaces. Michael Hardey, Lee Humphreys, and Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith have explored some of the uses of locative media. For example, Humphreys argues that the creation, sharing, and exchanging of both social and locational information with others through the location-based social networking service Dodgeball “contribute[s] to a sense of commonality” for users (“Mobile Social Networks and Urban Public Space” (768). Hardey argues that the relation between mobile technologies and location with Web 2.0 technologies has created “a new cartography of urban life” that is personalized for the individual user (868). Through the affordances of digital media—particularly the ability to manipulate, combine, and visualize data—developers and users can create mashups of information, like maps, that can be easily accessed via mobile phones (875-876). Hardey concludes that “Places in the city become malleable as they take on different meanings for different people at different times” (880).
In fact, I would argue that contrary to Gergen’s concerns that convergences on mobile technologies might be making us more absent, locative technologies might be allowing us to interact on new and different levels. In Chapter 1, I mentioned Camille Paglia’s critique of Lady Gaga as part of an archive of cultural responses to technologies that decry how they are ruining communication. I was surprised with how quickly some of my students agreed with Paglia’s assertion that “Gaga’s flat affect doesn’t bother them because they’re not attuned to facial expressions. They don’t notice her awkwardness because they’ve abandoned body language in daily interactions.” Despite my own observations that students often use Twitter and Facebook as part of their daily face-to-face interactions (to plan meetings, to reflect on gatherings, to comment on interactions in the moment), and my observations that they clearly were not affectless in class, some of my students latched onto the idea that screens are leading to disembodiedness.

But if we return to digital activities by Snakes & Lattes patrons, we see that their activities are often very embodied and show awareness of and engagement in location. By using mobile phones to check in at Snakes & Lattes on Foursquare, Facebook, and Yelp, by writing reviews on Yelp, by tweeting to and about Snakes & Lattes’s Twitter account, by posting pictures on Instagram, Facebook, Foursquare, and Yelp, users not only document their experiences there, but also make their experiences mobile and sharable with others in those networks. These devices help to make connections, to help various people and objects come into relation with each other through time and space.

This chapter explored in part the use of objects to create permeable private spheres in public material spaces. But social media users also use social networking sites as semi-private spaces in order to construct and represent their various identities. In the next chapter, I turn to privacy online and identity in order to explore not the creation of private spaces, but the public availability of private information online—especially as it can be easily recorded, searched, and
aggregated by machines and others in order to research, understand, and create identity narratives about others.
Chapter 3

The Digital Traces of Identity Online

On September 19, 2010, Rutgers undergraduate Dharun Ravi tweeted to his 148 followers:

“Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly’s room and turned on my
webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay” (Parker; “Counter-Statement of Facts” 1).

From his friend Molly Wei’s room in the same residence hall, Ravi had turned on his webcam
remotely through iChat (Apple’s instant messenger client) and the two observed, if only for a few
seconds or minutes, Ravi’s roommate Tyler Clementi and another man kissing. Later that week,
Ravi planned another webcam spying incident, though it never came to fruition. The
webcamming incident, this tweet and others, and the circumstances around them would set off a
public drama a few days later, when, on September 22, 2010, Ravi’s roommate Tyler Clementi
committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge, which connects New Jersey to
New York.

Ravi’s behavior could be dismissed as typical young adult pranks and curiosity, or could
be interpreted as hostile homophobic voyeurism, and the nation might never have known about it
had Clementi not committed suicide that very week. Clementi’s suicide coincided with the
beginning of Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign, a series of YouTube video posted by
Savage, other celebrities and politicians, and regular citizens to an imagined audience of gay
teenagers who felt bullied and were seen as a risk of suicide. That September had been
particularly traumatic for the national public (at least those sympathetic to gays), as Clementi was
among three other gay teenage boys who had received national media attention for taking their
own lives that month.
The national media—in newspapers, on television, and in news blogs—were quick to pick up on this narrative, and to paint Ravi’s invasion of Clementi’s privacy as causing the suicide. Not only did the media attribute Clementi’s suicide to Ravi’s behavior, but Ravi was depicted as a tormenter and bully, and numerous facts were inaccurately reported. News claimed that Ravi recorded Clementi having sex, that he posted the recording online, and that he had forced Clementi out of the closet. But, as Ian Parker counters in his thorough 2012 *New Yorker* feature on Clementi and Ravi, “In fact, there was no posting, no observed sex, and no closet.” Nevertheless, Clementi’s suicide became a touchstone and catalyst for anti-bullying discourse and legislation, both in New Jersey and nationally, and Ravi was quickly portrayed as a tormentor and became perhaps the most prominent “bully” in the United States. In April 2012, he was convicted on fifteen charges, including multiple charges of invasion of privacy, bias intimidation (a hate crime in New Jersey), and tampering with evidence and with a witness, and in May he was sentenced to 30 days in jail, community service, anti-bullying classes, and probation (Zernike).¹

This chapter takes up Ravi’s invasion of Clementi’s privacy through the webcam, as well as various discursive and literate activities before and after the events of that September, in order to explore relationships between privacy and identity in digital environments. In fact, many of the discursive and literate activities before and after those events in September 2010 are as interesting for investigating privacy in digital settings as the actual invasion itself. Social media was at play a whole month before Ravi and Clementi met, when Ravi spent late nights on his computer investigating Clementi’s identity and chatting with friends on instant messenger about who they imagined Clementi to be based on the digital evidence Ravi found. And later, news reports latched onto the case, mis-reporting the case: While they reported that Ravi posted a video online

¹ The charges for tampering with evidence stem from Ravi’s deletion of tweets after he found out Clementi requested a room change. Ravi was charged with tampering with a witness because he texted Wei while she was investigated, “trying to suggest to her what to say and even supplying information to her for her to convey to the investigation” (“Counter-Statement of Facts” 7-8).
of Clementi engaging in sex, available to the public, and thus forcing Clementi out of the closet, in actuality Clementi was already out to his family, at least some friends, and in online forums, and Ravi’s video was not recorded or posted on the web and only captured Clementi and his partner kissing. As media attention built to the case, the website Gawker began to build up evidence of who Clementi was and how he was feeling by turning to his digital traces on various sites and posting screenshots and interpreting them on their site. Clementi’s digital traces, left on various websites as posts, profiles, comments, and images, were used by both Ravi and Gawker to develop an identity for him.

Using various discursive and literate activities as evidence—as they are mediated through legal documents, newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, and online journalism—I argue in this chapter that scholars of rhetoric need to understand identity in digital media settings as externalized, as a series of digital traces, or a “digital dossier” (Solove, The Digital Person 2). This is, in part, nothing new: identity is already partially understood as externalized, as something performed in specific texts in specific contexts. But identity changes in digital environments because of the changing nature of private information online and how it is easily recorded, searched, aggregated, and repurposed. Privacy was in part developed as a construct in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to make personal property and information secure and safe; information and property in the public was considered vulnerable and not secure (Poster, Information 101). However, in digital environments, much private information is recorded, left in a series of digital traces, and thus no longer secure. The proliferation of private information recorded online allows for others to then assemble that information. Identity online thus becomes a matter of what others research and know about you, about the digital dossier they assemble for you, rather than solely the contextualized performance that you attempt to create. While it is true that one has multiple identities in physical and online spaces, key features of digital media—
particularly the persistence, searchability, and aggregation of information—allow for people to research and create narratives about others based on their digital dossiers.

This chapter follows the chronology of events surrounding Ravi and Clementi, but before I explore the rhetorical and literacy activities from August 2010 (days before they met) to April 2012 (the end of Ravi’s trial), I first explain what I mean by identity: An externalized digital dossier or set of digital traces that is researched by others in order to learn the “truth” about a person. This is an important shift in understanding identity online from rhetorical analyses that focus instead on textual performances of identity online. I then turn to Ravi’s investigation of Clementi’s identity before they ever met—an Internet search for Clementi’s digital dossier that unfolded over time and involved instant messaging with friends in order to build a tentative picture of the “truth” about Clementi. An important aspect of this search, I explain, is that identity online has taken on the structure of the closet—not just a secret that an individual keeps from others, but knowledge that researchers keep from the ones they research.

From there, I turn to Ravi and Wei’s invasion of Clementi’s privacy, chronicling what happened based on the evidence available. This chronicling is important for two reasons: to show the very social nature of voyeurism, and to contrast the reality of events with how the case was framed by national media. National media, I show, created a narrative of causation (Ravi’s invasion of privacy caused Clementi’s suicide) that depended on logics of privacy and publicity: Mediated reports inaccurately reported that Ravi witnessed sex, recorded a video, and posted it publicly online, pulling Clementi out of the closet. Mass media thus presented Clementi as a private citizen, vulnerable, innocent, and closeted—someone with whom we should identify. In contrast, Ravi was represented as a public figure, a bully, a publicist and invader of privacy—someone the reading public should dis-identify with. Despite Clementi’s own drive toward sorts of publicity (he evidently broadcast sexual experiences on cam4, an amateur pornography website where users broadcast their sexual experiences—either individually or with others), and despite
his sexuality, Clementi is the ideal, innocent, private citizen in these representations—a sort of intimate, infantile citizen Lauren Berlant theorizes as the current idealized citizen in mass culture America (21)—and publicity, the foil to the private, is understood as deadly. Importantly, this allows the reading public to disavow their own voyeuristic behavior and implication in a culture of humiliation.

Lastly, I turn to two more uses of digital evidence: Gawker’s pursuit of information about Clementi’s identity and feelings before his suicide, and the use of digital evidence during the trial. The cultural logic that digital dossiers somehow tell us the “truth” about an identity informs various moments throughout this case study: Ravi’s online search for Clementi (“who is my new roommate?”), journalists’ research on Ravi and Clementi (“who were these two young men?”), and investigators’ and jurors’ use of digital evidence (“was Ravi motivated by homophobia, and thus a homophobe?”). These research activities and assemblages of digital evidence are part of what Jodi Dean describes as “a key technocultural fantasy” that “the truth is out there.” She writes, “Such a fantasy informs desires to click, link, search, and surf cyberia’s networks. We fantasize that we’ll find the truth, even when we know that we won’t, that any specific truth or answer is but a momentary fragment” (8). And indeed, there is always a hint of doubt surrounding these searches: In August 2010, Ravi found the wrong Tyler on Facebook, and seemed still doubtful about who Clementi was. Later, after Clementi’s suicide, Gawker assembled digital artifacts of Clementi’s online life, but commenters on the site were still somewhat doubtful that these authentically belong to him. And during the trial, while evidence was strong that Ravi seemed motivated in part by the fact that Clementi was gay, there seems to still be some doubt: If only Ravi had a character witness who was a gay friend. I conclude this chapter with some repercussions for rhetorical understandings of trust, vulnerability, and digital media.
Identity in Digital Age

One’s self is both social and withdrawn—social in that it is constructed in relation with others, but withdrawn in that the self is never fully accessible to others. Identity can be understood in this way as well. It is at once social—constructed and situated in various contexts—and something felt as “owned,” one’s consciousness not fully accessible to others. The interior self is not accessible to others (if it is even completely accessible to the self); instead, in social and rhetorical situations we have access to parts or fragments of others. Georg Simmel puts it this way: “We cannot know completely the individual of another. . . . It is impossible . . . to see anything but juxtaposed fragments” (Simmel 10-11). Rhetorical scholars have typically approached identity through these fragments, those external representations or performances, or claims about oneself or one’s identity group (see, for example, Hawisher and Sullivan; Baron; Humphreys, “Photographs”; Nakamura, Digitizing Race, Chapters 1 and 4; Heiker and King; Grabill and Pigg; Knobel and Lankshear 269-277; Lankshear and Knobel 121-124).

In this section, I outline how rhetorical scholars have approached identity as a textual performance or rhetorical strategy, and then outline an understanding of identity in digital settings as fragmented, distributed across multiple environments, and available as a “digital dossier” (Solove, The Digital Person 2) for others to collect, assemble, and interpret. This means, in part, re-thinking print- and oral-based assumptions about an identity as a static performance. As Martha S. Cheng observes, rhetoricians tend to focus on “planned, formal texts” in which the rhetor plans a written or oral message for an imagined audience and then delivers that text. However, much of the rhetorical work regarding identity online is more immediate (198). And while it is immediate, this rhetorical work also persists, becoming available for others to search at later dates in order to create narratives about one’s identity. In effect, I am arguing that the ways in which private information is stored in various locations online means a turn from rhetorical
Identity performance to rhetorical identity reading: the research and assemblage of information about another online in order to develop understandings about who they are.

Identity has increasingly been understood as an externalized, fragmented performance by numerous scholars and theorists, but before these approaches developed, identity was theorized as an internalized aspect of the self. From John Locke to psychologist Erik Erikson, identity was understood in terms of consciousness, or “the interior state of awareness or intentionality” (Poster, Information 101). As Mark Poster explains Locke, identity is the awareness of oneself as the same, a sense of ownership over the self (105-106). Poster chronicles an important change in understandings of identity: Rather than understand it solely as consciousness, identity began to have exterior elements with the rise of modernity. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Poster explains that methods of identification that developed in modernity, like photographs and fingerprinting, meant that media was also coupled with identity, so that “individual identity is being transformed, by dint of information media, into something that both captures individuality and yet exists in forms of external traces” (111). Increasingly, identity is understood as rhetorical and textual practices that should be understood in discursive contexts, and not a static sense of interiority. Stuart Hall explains that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions” (4).

Rhetorical work on identity has focused on this discursive, externalized, and performed aspects of identity. Dana Anderson’s Identity’s Strategy, for instance, explores conversion narratives to show “how rhetors constitute their own identities through experiences of conversion in ways that would persuade” (14). For Anderson, identities are a rhetorical strategy that, quoting Burke, “serve as motives for the shaping or transforming of behavior” (A Grammar 342; Anderson 16). As Bronwyn Williams explains, “The idea of performance emphasizes that, rather than having a single stable identity that I present to the rest of the world, my sense of identity is
external and socially contingent” (5). We enact or perform different identities in different contexts.

Early claims about identities online tended to be decontextualized utopian or dystopian claims—for example, the famous and now debunked idea that online platforms would be a place to leave behind socially constructed biases and treat each other as equals. In these early theoretical formulations, the belief was that if people could write online anonymously, they could be treated as equals, leaving behind their identities. This utopian vision, however, ignored how online spaces were still sites where users brought their biases with them, reproducing othering discourses that still excluded people (for example, sexist discourse in anonymous online forums). Jeffrey Boase and Barry Wellman critique these utopian and dystopian theorizations about identity and social relations online that fail to take into account actual contexts and how users actually do use the Internet (711). Rhetorical scholars have approached identity online in order to explore how identities are constructed, constricted, and performed textually and visually in various settings.

Lisa Nakamura’s scholarship is a good representation of this type of work. In her analysis of how Internet users take on differently racialized identities online, Lisa Nakamura calls attention to how these “identity tourists” engage “in a superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness, a person who is satisfied with an episodic experience as a racial minority” (Cybertypes 55). Despite utopian claims that the Internet can be an inclusive space because identity markers can be shed, instead the Internet can be constricting, “cybertyping” individuals with racialized discourse and narrow options for representation. In her later work on visual cultures online, Nakamura explores the flipside of racist representations and stereotypes online by analyzing the visual cultures and rhetorics of users who resist dominant narratives and images of themselves: for instance, the use of the website Allooksame? by Asians to resist the reification of race as visually identifiable and readable (Digitizing Race 78), and uses of visual self-representations by
pregnant women in online communities that offer alternatives to the hyper-exaggerated feminine bodies that are seen as the “norm” on the Internet (136).

Additionally, rhetorical scholars have increasingly understood identity performances and constructions online as part of building relationships. Carolyn Miller explains that this relationship building is an important aspect of the rhetorical work we do online: “Beyond the purposive and rational, beyond the informative and directive, we seek out and create social relationships, and we conduct our rational business within the direct and constraining context of those relationships” (“Writing in a Culture” 268). In his review of digital rhetoric, James Zappen synthesizes scholarship on identities and communities online: one of the purposes of self-expression online is “exploring individual and group identities and participation and creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities of shared interest” (322). Communicating identities online isn’t the simple interaction between a rhetor and audience, but instead “a complex negotiation between various versions of our online and our real selves, between our many representations of our selves and our listeners and readers, and, not least (as [Lev] Manovich suggests), between our many selves and the computer structures and operations through which we represent these selves to others” (323).

Zappen’s claim that in order to understand identities we need to attend to “computer structures and operations” and not just rhetor/audience negotiations means attending to how digital environments might give us cause to re-think identity performances online—that is, how they are different from the “planned, formal texts” that rhetoric typically approaches (Cheng 198). Jeffrey Grabill and Stacey Pigg suggest that digital media can provide new challenges for understanding how identities are performed online. Online forums, they explain, can be messy sites for exploring rhetorical identities and agency. Because interactions on these sites are both non-linear and persistent, they can present challenges for rhetorical analysis: “The actors are many, are not around for very long, and typically engage in textual fragments” (100). That is,
rhetorical action online is often transitory, immediate, and fragmentary, yet the action persists as long as a website is still online.

The persistence of rhetorical actions in online settings, combined with the ability to easily aggregate and assemble information, means that rhetorical actions in various digital contexts is readily available to be re-purposed and put into new contexts by others. Users’ proliferation of private information online means that individuals are present in multiple spaces online “through their textual, aural, and visual uploads” (Poster, *Information* 41). Through uploading and distributing content through a variety of resources, including blogs, discussion forums, listservs, social networking sites, and through having content uploaded, distributed, and stored for them by automated systems (such as cookies), users reach a variety of other online participants in a multitude of ways. As Poster further explains, the self becomes embedded in various digital databases, which disrupts our understanding of identity as consciousness (92). Information about oneself is exteriorized (100), or, as Solove puts it, “Information about an individual [. . .] is diffused in the minds of a multitude of people and scattered in various documents and computer files across the country” (*The Digital Person* 43). Solove calls the information recorded about individuals in various, dispersed digital locations their “digital dossiers” (2).2 These dossiers, unlike print records collected about a person in one file, are distributed in various digital locations, but because digital data is so easily aggregated and analyzed, it can be pulled together, assembled in various ways.

An important difference between print dossiers and digital dossiers is the security of information about oneself. In many ways, privacy developed as a social construct in the nineteenth century to protect and make secure property. Private property was marked as “safe” or

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2 Solove’s concern with digital dossiers is how information flows between and amongst governmental and private institutions: between databases of private corporations; from government records to private businesses; and from private businesses to government agencies (*The Digital Person* 3). While Solove’s concern about digital dossiers is with the legal aspects of privacy, the term is also analytically useful for concerns of social privacy.
“secure,” whereas public information was equated with the “insecure.” As Poster explains, the marking of property as private also marked its vulnerability: It was “vulnerable to misappropriation.” Poster contrasts this material privacy in the nineteenth century to digital culture, which “extends this ‘private’ domain to the intimate details of all cultural forms, making insecure everything that can be put into such a medium of traces” (Information 100). Anything considered private yet also recorded digitally is marked by vulnerability: “Digital networks thus extend the domain of insecurity to objects that had previously been relatively safe” (101).

Privacy serves a number of functions for identity development and presentation. It allows people the chance to develop a sense of who they are outside of the gaze of others. It also allows individuals to present themselves in different ways to different audiences, because their whole self is not available. You can be anonymous, and thus have a sense of privacy, even in public spaces. Or, as a teacher, you can present only aspects of yourself that help you be a teacher, keeping aspects of your life private from your students. Privacy is important for reputation management as well, as one can only have some control over their reputation if they have control over how information about them flows. Groups too make use of privacy for identity development: groups of teenagers in private spaces away from the surveillance of parents and teachers, or subaltern groups in private spaces or even public spaces that are seen as private because they are not regularly attended by people of dominant identities.

Physical spaces and print media both provide this type of privacy, even when they are public. A coffee shop affords private spaces for conversations; a gay club may be public but less likely to be attended by homophobic people and thus have a sense of privacy; a zine or newsletter by a punk high school student might circulate solely amongst other punks, never reaching the writer’s parents. Social networking sites can offer this sort of privacy as well, but features of digital media provide two important differences: information is permanent, and information is easily aggregated and searched. Thus, while Facebook can be both public and private in different
senses, the ease with which it is searched and how information is aggregated on the site makes it possible for others to more easily find this information. And when users are on multiple sites, perhaps over the span of years, with some sites or profiles abandoned or used only temporarily, a “digital dossier” (Solove, *The Digital Person*) develops, leaving digital traces that can accumulate and be searched for or stumbled upon by others, and thus assembled with other information to create a exteriorized, digital identity for others.

The use of digital dossiers to learn about others’ identities is quickly becoming more and more common. Facebook users “stalk” each other after meeting to learn more about each other. Employers google potential employees or look at their Facebook profiles, and more recently, have even asked applicants for their account email and password to make sure their Facebook accounts are acceptable (Farrington). (Facebook argues that these requests are against their terms of service, and announced that they would work with policy makers to help fight against this employment practice [Brodkin]).

Actors are engaged in multiple sites in ways that might converge, either through a user’s decisions to link accounts (e.g., linking my Foursquare check-ins to my Facebook account), through the aggregation features of certain sites (e.g., a Google search results page that brings together various sites), through a site’s new features that link other activities (e.g., Facebook’s Beacon feature that I discussed in Chapter 1), or through the research activities of other users online (e.g., Ravi’s search for Clementi’s identity online, as I will discuss in more detail below). Mimie Sheller and John Urry point out that distributed information online about oneself means that “individuals increasingly exist beyond their private bodies,” leading to increased mobility because users can retrieve information about themselves, like their bank information, from virtually any location (116). Because of the distribution of recorded information, “even the most intimate ‘private’ is no longer entirely ‘personal’ or ‘inner-worldly’” (117). In addition to the abilities to retrieve information about oneself, the fragmentation of a self across multiple sites
means that others too can retrieve this information and piece it together to tell a narrative about oneself.

One’s own identity has been part of the traditional archive for inventional activities online, as rhetors draw on and perform their identities in digital spaces. But rhetorical scholars have typically ignored the inventional practices of constructing others’ identities through their distributed information online. That is, rather than looking at solely the rhetorical strategies of performing an identity in specific contexts, we might turn to the rhetorical strategies of constructing others’ identities through Internet searches. In August 2010, Ravi engaged in such activities, which I explore in the next section.

**August 2010: “Found out my roommate is gay”**

Just who is Dharun Ravi, and who was Tyler Clementi? These questions, whether implied or explicit, inform much of the discursive drama around Clementi and Ravi, from before they met in August 2010, through the media attention to Clementi’s suicide and Ravi’s invasion of his privacy, and on through Ravi’s trial and conviction and the attendant media coverage. These questions were probably first asked when Ravi and Clementi learned they were going to be roommates before they arrived at Rutgers in August 2010. In order to answer the question “Who is Tyler Clementi?”, Ravi turned to the Internet and his research skills to learn about his new roommate. As Ian Parker narrates, Ravi had emailed Clementi when he learned they’d be roommates but hadn’t received a response (Parker explains that Clementi probably didn’t respond quickly because he was embroiled in the emotional drama of coming out to his parents). Using the little information he had about him—Clementi’s first name and last initial and his email address, keybowvio@yahoo.com—Ravi soon discovered that Clementi had posted in Yahoo
forums about fish tanks and violins, and had posted questions about asthma and anti-virus software in other online forums (Parker).

Most of what we (“we” as in my readers, but also “we” as in the reading public of the *New Yorker* or of newspaper or television stories covering the trial) know about Ravi’s initial Internet searches for Clementi come from Ravi’s iChat records, which were entered in court records as evidence, and which were covered in news stories about the trial and narrated in Parker’s article. When I first began exploring Ravi’s literate activities, I was tempted to focus solely on Ravi’s searches and what he found, largely intending to ignore his instant messaging and only mentioning his tweets when they seemed relevant. But to ignore some of the media Ravi used while researching and narrating this would be to ignore important parts of his reading and writing ecology. Ravi was engaged in inventive work, work that was only partially searching the websites he found. Important to that inventive work was the iChat conversations he engaged in with his high school friend Jason Tam that night and with other friends over the next few days.

Another way of framing this is that I initially wanted to find what stable “text” Ravi was creating about Clementi: a final, hermeneutic conception of who Clementi was. Instead, I would argue, we should be looking at the entire ecology of Ravi’s inventive work (as much as is available to us), which includes not only the rooting out of Clementi’s identity from sites, but also the conversations Ravi had on iChat and the posts he made on Twitter to process the information he was finding. I use the term “hermeneutic” following Collin Brooke, who makes the distinction between *hermeneutic* invention and *proairetic* invention, drawing on Roland Barthes’s terminology. Rhetoric and writing teachers have reduced invention to the hermeneutic, Brooke argues, an approach “assuming a particular resolution” (78). That is, theories of invention in rhetoric and writing studies have largely focused on the individual writer who produces a singular product, a text (80). New media encourages us to turn our attention to practices with interfaces, rather than just the production of texts, as I explained in the introduction. Rather than focus on the
production of a final text with a closed meaning, Brooke encourages rhetorical scholars to attend to interfaces and *proairetic* invention, or “a focus on the generation of possibilities, rather than the elimination until all but one are gone and closure is achieved” (86).

Put slightly differently, Ravi wasn’t inventing a final, closed text of who Clementi was. Instead, his construction of Clementi generated multiple possibilities for his identity, and Ravi constructed his textual understanding of Clementi not through some single, coherent text, but rather through multiple reading and writing practices in multiple environments. If we were to imagine his writing ecology, we might imagine his computer screen with multiple browser windows open for a search engine, the sites he was finding, Facebook, and Twitter, and at least one iChat window open to write with Tam.

After discovering that Clementi had interests in violins and fish tanks and questions about software and asthma, Ravi messaged Tam: “I’m calling it now. This guy is retarded.” Clementi and Tam were conversing and speculating about Clementi, and Ravi was quick to share links, such as the link to the health forum where Clementi had asked about asthma symptoms. Shortly thereafter, Ravi discovered that Clementi was gay, and messaged Tam through iChat: “FUCK MY LIFE / He’s gay” (Parker). Ravi had discovered some of Clementi’s posts dating from 2006 on the website JustUsBoys.com, a website for gay, bisexual, and queer men that includes pornography, a blogging platform, and discussion forums. Using the same screen name as his yahoo account—keybowvio—Clementi had posted about a problem he was having with his hard drive. Ravi sent Tam the link to the forum, which included a rather mundane conversation and sexualized advertisements on the page. Ravi posted on Twitter the night of his discovery: “Found out my roommate is gay” with a link to the JustUsBoys page he had found (Parker).

Ravi’s motives for learning about Clementi don’t seem malicious, based on Parker’s account of his iChat messages. As with any incoming college student, he was curious about his new roommate, and after emailing Clementi, he hadn’t heard back. So he naturally turned where
any technologically savvy college student might: the Internet. Based on what he read by Clementi, he assumed that Clementi was not very comfortable with technology and that he was poor (he based this assumption on Clementi’s concerns about technology, but Clementi’s family was in fact solidly middle class). He also learned that years earlier Clementi had created T-shirt designs for Zazzle, a website that printed shirts on-demand for customers. Ravi and Tam chatted together to speculate about Clementi and to understand and interpret the sites they found. Tam was confused as to why a gay website would have forums, but Ravi didn’t seem confused and shrugged it off. Tam summarized Clementi in an iChat message: “a gay person who asks a lot of questions, is mostly techno illiterate, and makes tshirt ideas.” Ravi responded, “I’m literally the opposite of that / FUCK” (Parker).

After completing a tentative narrative about Clementi, Ravi turned to Facebook. Instead of finding Clementi on Facebook, he found another gay Rutgers student named Tyler C. Picone and assumed that this was his future roommate (based on the “Tyler C.”). Ravi looked through Picone’s pictures and was surprised with the contrast between his image of Clementi and Picone’s image as more socially adept. Ravi contacted Picone through Facebook and later received a response that he had the wrong Tyler. But before the response, Ravi gossiped with friends on iChat about Picone, and speculated about him. From iChat records in the court documents, Parker interprets Ravi’s conceptions of Picone: “Ravi seems to have kept two ideas of Picone separate: Picone was someone he might come to like, but he was also material for a ‘gay roommate’ news scoop. Ravi certainly appears to have cared a lot more about the reputational value of gossip than about Picone’s sexuality” (Parker).

Ravi was not alone in seeking out information about his new roommate before meeting. Clementi also looked up Ravi, finding his Twitter account, which would have been quite easy, given that Ravi’s username was @Dharun and it was publicly available. Before meeting Dharun,
Clementi had already read Ravi’s tweet announcing that he “Found out my roommate is gay” (Parker).

For a variety of possible reasons, Ravi’s investigation into Clementi’s identity was more documented and accessible than Clementi’s search for Ravi. This is most likely the case because Ravi was on trial for bias intimidation, so his attitude toward Clementi and homosexuality was more important for building the case than Clementi’s attitudes before the privacy invasions. Thus, it was more important to enter that evidence—the iChat records, particularly—into court documents. Also possible is that Ravi was more interested in finding out information about Clementi, or that Ravi was more literate in searching for someone online. An additional possibility—pure speculation here about Ravi’s identity as a socialite—is that Ravi was more interested in gossiping with his friends about his potential roommate than Clementi, who seemed much less social, was. Or, perhaps Clementi was too preoccupied before school started, as he had just come out to his parents as gay. But whatever the reasons, there are numerous records showing us that Ravi was able to construct an identity for Clementi, whether accurate or not, from the Yahoo forums, JustUsBoys.com posts, Zazzle product ideas, and Facebook (though the Facebook profile was Picone’s, not Clementi’s). Through only two search engines (Google’s and Facebook’s), Ravi was able to piece together digital traces left on various different pages of four social media sites.

Clementi more than likely used these sites for a variety of different rhetorical purposes, and in different situations and moments. The identities he performed and constructed on these sites—whether a momentary identity as an asthmatic with questions, or a more long-term but still distributed identity as a young gay man who had questions about technology—were likely not intended to be read together to build a coherent identity for him. Instead, over the period of years, Clementi had utilized a variety of social, informational, and consumer sites for a variety of
purposes: for information, for connecting with other gay men, to explore interests in music, and so forth.

And Clementi could explore these various aspects of his self in different forums because of a feeling of privacy provided by these sites. While they were publicly available, he was using a pseudonym, and the sites were distinct and separate from each other, allowing him to explore different aspects of himself or seek information. While Clementi could perform different aspects of himself in these different spaces, he made an important rhetorical choice that affected how easy it was for Ravi to find him: He used the same username across platforms. Because of the ways in which digital media is easily aggregated online, especially through search engines like Google, Clementi’s activities on separate sites could be linked together by Ravi to create a seemingly coherent image of his identity. Whether this identity Ravi constructed was accurate or not, Ravi could understand Clementi as a gay man who played music and was not the most technologically adept.

In *The Unwanted Gaze*, Jeffrey Rosen makes the distinction between information and knowledge, using the celebrity as an example. Equating “knowledge” with “intimacy,” Rosen explains that we get a sense of intimacy or knowledge with a celebrity because of all the available information about him or her, but “we don’t really know a television celebrity, even though he may appear every night in our living room” (201). Similarly, information about oneself that might be considered private, once discovered, can give others a sense of knowledge or intimacy about that person. Gaining knowledge about others, or the “truth” about them, is one primary reason for mediated voyeurism, depending on a belief that information or images reveal “apparently real and unguarded lives” (Calvert 58-63, 3). Ravi most likely felt like he knew Clementi before they met—maybe he was withholding final judgment, but he had a sense of that knowledge.

This sense of knowledge may be a reason that once Clementi and Ravi met, they barely talked. For their first three weeks living together, it seemed they largely lived in silence. Clementi
and Ravi met face-to-face on August 28 as they moved into their residence hall room. Clementi’s chat records reveal that as Ravi unpacked that day, Clementi was reading Ravi’s Twitter stream and chatting with a friend on instant messenger about how he still didn’t know how to pronounce Ravi’s name and making fun of his “sooo Indian first gen americanish” heritage, joking that his parents “defs owna dunkin”—a joke on the stereotype that many Dunkin’ Donuts are owned by Indians. The next three weeks of living together seemed to be largely in silence: Clementi wrote to friends on instant messenger that he wasn’t sure how to start a conversation, and noted that Ravi seemed to hide behind his closet door when he was changing, a silent response to Clementi’s homosexuality and “the most awk thing you’ve ever seen,” as he told a friend on chat (Parker). Clay Calvert explains that mediated voyeurism inhibits discussion: Because the voyeur is engaged in an act of observation, rather than interaction, discourse with the observed rarely follows (34). And so it seems with Ravi: He had nothing to say to his socially awkward roommate, and likely didn’t admit to Clementi that he knew he was gay until his final apology texts the night Clementi committed suicide, writing in part, “I’ve known you were gay and I have no problem with it” (Parker).

Ravi’s silence to Clementi on his own knowledge that Clementi was gay leads me to a final point about the rooting out of identities through digital dossiers: The knowledge created functions through the logic of the closet. Eve Sedgwick explains in Epistemology of the Closet that the homo/hetero dichotomy structures much of Western thought and discourse, even when it is not readily apparent, including the public/private distinction and the binary of secrecy/disclosure. The logic of the homosexual closet has been so strongly tied to these two binaries that for someone to disclose information about themselves is now framed as “coming out of the closet”: to “come out” as disabled, as conservative, as atheist. This does not mean that the

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3 This does not mean that all discourse is inhibited. One social reason for mediated voyeurism is to provide topoi for discussion with friends, acquaintances, and others (perhaps mostly for gossip) (Calvert 57).
closet has been “evacuated of its historical gay specificity”; instead, it reveals how “indelibly marked” notions of privacy, secrecy, and disclosure are with (homo)sexual definition (72).  

The intertwinement of privacy and the logic of the closet is no mere accident, but is rather a result of the historical co-incidence (as opposed to “mere coincidence”) of the “invention” of modern homosexual identities and modern information privacy in the late nineteenth century. As Foucault explains in The History of Sexuality, the late nineteenth century witnessed the invention of sexual identities: Certain sexual acts began to be understood as markers of sexual identity (43). Sedgwick and Tim Dean both note the coincident development of modern sexual identities and conceptions of privacy in the late nineteenth century (Sedgwick, Epistemology 91; T. Dean, “Hart Crane’s Poetics” 99-101). That the closet metaphor is already wrapped into notions of privacy is evident in Warren and Brandeis’s 1890 discussion of privacy and their concerns about new communication technologies: “what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops,” they worry (76). Dean argues that the coincidence of the emergence of privacy, the closet, and homosexual identities in the late nineteenth century helped to produce “a new form of subjectivity or personhood” based on a notion of “inviolable personality” that “makes sexuality the essence or truth of subjectivity” (“Hart Crane’s Poetics” 104). He argues further that “Closet logic pervades twentieth-century American culture to such a degree that it is difficult to imagine an alternative outside its terms” (105).

Vernacular theory of the homosexual closet often portrays it as a secret that is kept by a queer individual from others, and then one discloses, or “comes out of the closet.” But Sedgwick helps us to consider how the logic of the closet is a shared epistemological phenomenon. She explains that the closet is not simply a matter of an individual having a secret about him or herself. It also means that others have that secret as well, and that part of their work is to keep

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4 See Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (79-82) for her discussion of how the homosexual closet still differs from other closets in terms of risks and epistemology.
their knowledge secret from the closeted individual (*Epistemology* 225-226). (For example, a parent “knows” her child is gay, but waits until the child discloses, or I “know” a woman’s boyfriend is gay, but don’t disclose my knowledge to him or his girlfriend.) If the closet is tightly wrapped up with modern notions of privacy, and thus modern notions of identity as something interior, or “self-knowledge,” then identity is also, I speculate, a matter of what others know about the self but don’t let the self know they know. That is, identity is a matter of seeking out information about another in order to know them, but not let them know it.

To return from this departure into privacy and epistemology back to Ravi and Clementi: It is part of the cultural logic of investigating identities based on digital dossiers, I contend, to keep the newfound knowledge from the other. Thus, rooting out of identities based on digital dossiers is a rhetorical and literate set of practices that often results in gossip with others, but not discourse with the person investigated. Knowledge about the other doesn’t lead to discourse with the other, but rather gossip about him or her. Thus, Ravi spent time gossiping with friends on iChat about who Clementi was or might be, but then largely lived in silence with Clementi, not disclosing his own knowledge about Clementi’s sexuality until the day of Clementi’s suicide.

Facebook “stalking” follows this logic as well. When Facebook users first meet someone, or hear about someone, they are likely to check their Facebook profile for information about them (and sometimes, failing that, googling them): What are their likes and interests? Who are their friends? What sorts of activities do they engage in? But rarely is it deemed acceptable to admit to the new acquaintance that you have “creeped” on their Facebook profile. The mediated voyeurism of learning about another is a secret.
September 2010: A Webcam Violation

After their first few weeks together in what seems to be near silence, Ravi and Clementi began a series of technological and discursive activities that would capture media attention for months (and even years) following. Before turning attention to how the national media framed the story of Ravi’s violation of Clementi’s privacy and Clementi’s subsequent suicide, it is necessary to recount what seems to have actually happened in late September, 2010. This account is necessary in part to contrast with how national media portrayed Ravi and Clementi and the events that transpired, but also to explore another type of voyeurism: the mediated observation of real-time activities. Here, instead of the use of an already documented digital dossier, we have a clearer violation of privacy: Clementi’s privacy was clearly violated by Ravi and Wei’s use of a webcam to witness him kissing (and possible attempt to witness more). (I have included a timeline of events that transpired, from the prosecution’s “Counter-Statement of Facts,” as Appendix A.)

Many practices like exhibitionism and voyeurism are not completely new practices or desires, but are rather practices made easier and enhanced by new media (see Blatterer). In Voyeur Nation, Calvert chronicles and explores a history of mediated voyeurism and exhibitionism in various mediated environments, including “reality television” like The Real World and Cops, tell-all television shows like Jerry Springer’s, news magazine shows like Dateline, and websites with sexually explicit images and videos, some of which are captured and posted without subjects’ consent or knowledge (3-11). Here, I argue, is just another example of mediated voyeurism, but one made easier by digital media. Despite our culture’s infatuation with voyeurism, social media gets blamed for our culture’s inability to respect privacy. For example AOL opinion writer Adam Hanft blames “Today’s social media world” and its “ethic of sharing” for creating “reflex behavior” and an “addictive power of instantaneity” that led Ravi to not reflect and violate Clementi’s privacy. But a look at cultural history shows other examples of
such mediated voyeurism, including the movie *M*A*S*H*, which features Hawkeye and Trapper John broadcasting a romantic encounter between Frank and Margaret to the whole base. After everyone on base heard Frank call Margaret “Hot Lips” during the encounter, Margaret earns the nickname throughout the rest of the movie.\(^5\) Importantly, mediated voyeurism is not new, and has often involved issues of power, difference, and humiliation. One aspect that makes it different in digital environments than non-digital voyeurism, though, is the ease of such voyeurism (fewer material resources are needed). Voyeurism is sometimes blamed for making us more isolated and individualistic, separated into our private spheres of voyeurism. I take up this claim at the end of this section, explaining how voyeurism is social and involves shared values.

Events began unfolding in mid-September, as Clementi invited “M.B.” to his residence hall room for their first sexual encounter on September 16 or 17, evidently deciding against renting a hotel room together.\(^6\) Three days later on Sunday, September 19, Clementi asked Ravi to have the room privately, as M.B. was again returning. At first Ravi wasn’t certain why Clementi had asked for the room, but through a chance situation of timing, as Ravi was collecting his things for the temporary eviction, he met M.B. as Clementi was leading him to the room. Ravi retreated to Wei’s room, reporting that M.B. seemed “old-looking,” and “slightly overweight”—and his working class appearance made Ravi concerned about theft of his personal property, particularly his iPad (Parker).\(^7\)

\(^5\) Susan O’Doherty makes the connection between the Clementi case and *M*A*S*H* in her 2010 Inside Higher Ed blog post.

\(^6\) I refer to Clementi’s sexual or romantic partner as “M.B.” because his identity was protected during the trial, as New Jersey law protects the identity of those whose privacy have been invaded (in addition to charges for invading Clementi’s privacy, Ravi was also charged for invading M.B.’s privacy). The date of their first meeting isn’t entirely clear from mass media narratives. Parker cites their first meeting as September 16. Dunn’s account of M.B.’s court testimony places their first sexual encounter as September 17, and reports that M.B. and Clementi had met online in August. (Other accounts also use September 17.)

\(^7\) Journalists reported during the trial that M.B. “did not match the description of the overweight ‘sketchy’ or ‘homeless’-looking man students had reported seeing visit Clementi” (Mulvihill). And Clementi evidently reported that M.B. was 25, not in his 30s as Ravi suspected (Parker).
According to Ravi’s friends, he had set his iChat on his computer to automatically accept requests to chat sometime before this evening. Many chat programs include an option to automatically accept in-coming requests for conversations, and can even have the webcam automatically turn on for accepted chats. With his monitor darkened or turned black, Ravi’s computer was already ready to spy on Clementi without any plans to do so. Sitting at Wei’s computer in her dorm room down the hall from Clementi, Ravi remotely turned on his webcam and he and Wei witnessed Clementi and M.B. kissing. As Wei explained during her testimony, they only saw a few seconds or minutes before turning the webcam off. Ravi then posted on Twitter: “Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly’s room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay.” Later that evening, when Ravi went out to “smoke” (probably marijuana), Wei’s roommate and three other women were in the room, and they turned the webcam back on, this time witnessing Clementi and M.B. kissing with their shirts off before turning the camera off after only a few minutes. Wei seemed most disturbed by witnessing the kissing, messaging her boyfriend on instant messenger about how she was disgusted. Her boyfriend asked if she had taken a picture, to which she responded that she should have, but then reconsidered: “Nah that would be TERRIBLE” (Parker).

The next day, Clementi read Ravi’s tweet about seeing him kiss M.B. His chat records and posts to JustUsBoys later that night reveal that he had seen the green light on Ravi’s webcam come on, but only briefly, and so he was able to assume that Ravi had only seen a brief moment of kissing. He reported to a friend on instant messenger that he “felt violated” but then wasn’t as sure about that feeling “when I remembered what actually happened.” Later that evening, Clementi posted on JustUsBoys under the username “cit2mo” about the situation, expressed that

Descriptions most likely didn’t match because Ravi and Wei approached M.B. as an outsider, someone who didn’t match the young college-aged expectations of someone in a residence hall. Pictures and recording were not allowed during M.B.’s testimony during the trial in order to protect his identity (Winch, “Who’s the Mystery Witness”).
he was “kinda pissed at him [Ravi]” but unsure if he wanted to report him and get him in trouble (see Figure 3-1). Late into the night, Clementi would continue posting to JustUsBoys and to a Yahoo forum, where others gave him advice and supported him. Advice ranged from suggesting that he not mention anything that would create conflict to suggesting that they talk or Clementi report him (Parker). At 4:28 A.M. (now technically Tuesday, September 21), Clementi posted on the JustUsBoys forum that he had filed a form for a change of roommate on Rutgers’ website (Parker). In his request, he wrote, “roommate used webcam to spy on me/want a single” (“Counter-Statement of Facts” 2).

Figure 3-1: A screenshot of Clementi’s initial post to JustUsBoys. Using the screen name “cit2mo,” he explained his roommate’s use of the webcam and asked for advice from other forum users. (Source: R. Miller, “Is Nothing Sacred?”)

That Tuesday in the afternoon, Clementi asked Ravi for the room a second time so that M.B. could visit once again, texting, “Could I have the room again like 9:30 till midnight?” Ravi texted back, agreeing, and then Ravi set into motion about what would probably be the most damning part of his case: premeditated invasion of privacy. His tweet at 6:39 P.M. that night read, “Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes, it’s happening again” (Parker). (Ravi’s Twitter stream is depicted in Figure 3-2, courtesy of Gawker).

Ravi asked his friends to help set up the angle of the webcam so that it was aimed directly at
Clementi’s bed (DeMarco) and texted an old friend from high school, Michelle Huang at Cornell University, about the webcam, telling her (jokingly or seriously) that “People are having a viewing party with a bottle of bacardi and beer in this kid’s room for my roommate” (Schweber; A. Friedman, “Text Messages”).

Figure 3-2: A screenshot of Dharun Ravi’s Twitter stream. The yellow arrows point to the tweets Ravi deleted. (Source: O’Connor, “How a College Kid”)

Ravi would contend during the trial that he later changed his mind and decided against using the webcam, instead opting to go play Frisbee. But incriminating evidence shows that perhaps he hadn’t really abandoned the plan: He texted Huang the next day, explaining, “it got messed up and didn’t work LOL.” And evidently, Clementi had been concerned that Ravi might use the webcam again so he had shut off the computer and unplugged the power strip before M.B. arrived (Parker). Likely, Clementi had read Ravi’s tweet: Computer records show he visited Ravi’s Twitter account 59 times during the week before his suicide, and 38 of those visits were during the last two days of his life. He had also taken screen shots of the Twitter stream that he saved to his computer (Solomon, “Rutgers Student Saw”). Clementi had gone further with his motion for a roommate change. He met with his resident assistant sometime on Tuesday, and emailed him and two superiors after M.B. had visited, outlining his grievances, writing “I feel like my privacy has been violated. I am extremely uncomfortable sharing a room with someone who acted in this wildly inappropriate manner” (“Counter-Statement of Facts” 3)). Late that night, Clementi updated those in the JustUsBoys forum, telling them he had emailed his resident assistant. This would be his last post to JustUsBoys.

The next day, Wednesday, September 22, Clementi talked to his mother on the phone, went to symphony rehearsal, saw Ravi for the first time since Sunday (their sleep schedules had not lined up), and ate dinner. From the Rutgers campus, he headed toward New York. He installed the Facebook app to his iPhone, and a few minutes later, at 8:42 P.M., updated his status: “Jumping off the gw bridge sorry” (Parker). Clementi’s phone and wallet were discovered by Port Authority that night, though his body wasn’t found until the following week, on September 29.

Before finding out about Clementi’s suicide (the police didn’t come to his door until late that night, and Ravi claims he didn’t see the Facebook update until the next day), Ravi sent two apology texts to Clementi, sometime around the same time as his suicide. (He claims he sent the
apology after being alerted that Clementi requested a room change [Gomstyn]). The first admitted to the first webcam incident, rationalizing his disclosures to others so that “they could give me advice,” and claiming that he turned his camera away on Tuesday night so that no one could use the webcam to see Clementi. His next text seems less smarmy, something that Parker notes “one wishes had been written three weeks before”:

I’ve known you were gay and I have no problem with it. I don’t want your freshman year to be ruined because of a petty misunderstanding, its adding to my guilt. You have the right to move if you wish but don’t want you to feel pressured to without fully understanding the situation. (Dunn)

Rutgers police came to his room later that night, where he gave a physical description of M.B. (Ravi feared that M.B. might be involved in foul play.) After they left, he turned to Twitter, deleting the older “Yay” tweet and the tweet inviting others to video chat. He posted a new tweet: “Roommate asked for room again. Its happening again. People with ichat don’t you dare video chat me from 930 to 12.” He then added a new tweet, “Everyone ignore the last tweet. Stupid drafts.” Ravi claims that he published the “Its happening again” tweet as a stored draft, meaning that he had written it previously, leaving it unpublished, and then accidentally posted it later. But the deletion of the other two tweets led prosecutors to believe that he had some guilt over the surveillance, and the deletion became the grounds for a tampering with evidence charge (Parker). (Google’s archives showed the originals; Additionally, investigators recovered the tweets from Ravi’s hard drive [“Counter-Statement” 6].)

On September 28, Ravi and Wei were both charged with invasion of privacy. The interpersonal drama that had occurred over the last week had already turned into a campus-wide drama and a national media drama with hundreds of newspaper and television reports. On Wednesday, September 29, Gawker published three posts about Clementi and Ravi, including images of Ravi’s Twitter stream, of Clementi’s JustUsBoys forums, and of Clementi’s cam4
profile picture. By September 30, over 15,000 Facebook users had joined a group memorializing Clementi (Pilkington), and over the next few days, Rutgers students and faculty would respond with a “die in” to represent LGBT students who had committed suicide, a “Black Friday” memorial organized by a fraternity on campus, a moment of silence at the home football game with Tulane University, and a candlelight vigil (Kaufman and Harper; Considine; Read and Nutt).

Little evidence exists that Ravi’s actions contributed to Clementi’s suicide—indeed, I would say it’s mere speculation if it did. Clementi hadn’t exhibited any signs of depression, according to his mother (Parker). In April 2011, a grand jury indicted Ravi on fifteen charges of invasion of privacy, bias intimidation, and tampering with evidence and a witness. Charges against Wei were dropped in a plea bargain in exchange for her witness testimony and community service (Egan). Clementi had left a suicide note, but it wasn’t entered into evidence during the trial (Gomstyn), and the suicide was barely mentioned during the three-week trial in 2012 (Cuomo), though suicide did hang over the trial as unspoken context. Ravi speculates that because the suicide note’s contents were inadmissible in the trial that his spying might not have played a big part in Clementi’s suicide (Gomstyn).

Ravi and Wei’s violations and attempted violations of Clementi’s privacy provide grounds to reject a conservative critique of voyeurism. In *Voyeur Nation*, Calvert recounts conservative legal scholar Robert H. Bork’s critique of voyeurism in *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. This line of critique places voyeurism as part of a liberal radical individualism that is caused by the decline in shared values and interactions with others. (It is unclear how much Calvert agrees with Bork’s argument; Calvert writes, “If this thesis is correct”—neither offering a critique nor fully supporting it [74]). Calvert’s recounting of Bork’s claim has it that “Voyeurism is an individual activity,” done in “private”: “Behind the computer screen, we can engage in visual pleasures and self-gratification without any compulsion for interaction” (75). But voyeurism, I would contend, is not individual nor a completely private affair. Ravi’s voyeurism
was never solelyindividual—shared with Wei in her dorm room, advertised to his followers on Twitter. The voyeurism was private in some regards (amongst a group of friends and acquaintances, a limited number of people, never fully public), but not an individual affair. There was, of course, no interaction with Clementi, but Ravi’s behaviors don’t necessarily read as hyper-individualistic either: voyeurism was shared, the pleasures of the peeping eye were shared, and responses were shared.

Individualism and individuation are at the heart of many critiques of voyeurism and current practices regarding shifting practices in privacy. Bork has it that radical individualism and voyeurism reinforce each other, as the voyeur acts privately behind a screen and shared values break down. I do not want to fully discount the breakdown of community values or individualistic voyeurism, but I think another story is more plausible, one that highlights shared values. Alan Westin argues that we invade or violate others’ privacy—through curiosity or surveillance—in order to monitor anti-social behavior (67-69). If we look at Clementi from Ravi and Wei’s perspectives, what we might see in Clementi is an awkward, quiet, anti-social homosexual who has invited another outsider—M.B., older, possibly working class—into a sphere of younger college students. Ravi’s surveillance is so fully accepted by his friends—those who watched from Wei’s room, those who planned to watch, those who responded in disgust to Clementi kissing in Twitter responses—because they shared values and an in-groupness that marked Clementi as an outsider.

The events of late September 2010 that I’ve recounted above—stitched together from Parker’s New Yorker piece and news reports about the 2012 trial—stand in contrast to the media accounts offered in that month and in October, accounts that would shape the public imagination about the case more so than the trial that brought forth more accurate information.
September and October 2010: Cultural Logics of Privacy Violations

In late September 2010, news of Clementi’s apparent suicide and Ravi and Wei’s invasion of his privacy swept through mainstream media and social networking sites. As I mentioned above, initial reports of Clementi’s suicide and Ravi’s invasion of his privacy got four things wrong: 1) that Ravi recorded Clementi having sex; 2) that Ravi posted this recording online, making it public; 3) that Ravi outing Clementi; and 4) that Ravi’s actions led to Clementi’s suicide. Various factors went into the strong media attention to Clementi’s suicide. Among these was the coincidence with Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better Campaign,” a response to the suicides of gay teenagers. Savage posted a YouTube video telling viewers (an imagined audience of gay teenagers struggling with homophobia and bullying) that it does get better and to not commit suicide, and his campaign encouraged thousands of others to do the same. Clementi’s was among four teenage gay suicides to get national media attention in September 2010.

Because of the national attention to bullying and homophobia, and particularly to the damaging psychological effects of bullying, the Ravi/Clementi story fit nicely into a pre-arranged narrative of a tormenter and victim. That narrative, combined with cultural anxiety around the loss of privacy online and fears that youth didn’t respect privacy anymore, made the Ravi/Clementi story perfect for national circulation. But the news stories reveal more about cultural anxieties around digital privacy than they do about what actually might have happened in a Rutgers residence hall that September. As Richard Miller explains on his website, “The print media convicts two kids for cyberspying without even knowing the difference between ‘iChat,’ live streamed video, and video posted on the Web” (“Don’t Read Wikileaks”).

More than merely being inaccurate, the redundancy of headlines and stories that perpetuate ideas that invasions of privacy online must be recorded and public served to universalize this story: It became a story about bullying in which the public identifies with an
outed, victimized, private Clementi and vilifies a publicizing, bullying Ravi. It was not that one single news article was in itself powerful for framing this situation. Rather, the redundancy of the articles—all telling roughly the same story—that allowed for an inaccurate, simplified version of the story. Kenneth Burke explains that rhetoric should often be understood “not in terms of one particular address, but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dully daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (A Rhetoric 26). Let me start by documenting the inaccuracies purported by the story, and then show how they were able to rhetorically equate Clementi with the private and Ravi with the public, therefore allowing for identification with Clementi rather than with Ravi.

The inaccuracies in news stories and subsequently popular imagination about this case may have very well been caused by police reports from officers who might not have understood what transpired in the days following Ravi’s (real and attempted) invasions of Clementi’s privacy, or they may be the consequence of sensational journalism. Either way, it is not just some fluke that led journalists and investigators to believe that Ravi and Wei observed a sex act, that it was recorded and posted online, and that Clementi was closeted. These three logics—sexual privacy, recorded private acts, and the closet—are central to how privacy was understood. Repeatedly, news stories circulated the narrative that a sex act was recorded and that Clementi had been ousted by his roommate, causing his suicide. A New York Times headline read, “Private Moment Made Public, Then a Fatal Jump” (Foderaro). A UK Guardian headline read, “Tyler Clementi, Student Outed as Gay on Internet, Jumps to His Death” (Pilkington). The New York Post’s headline for the story read, “Rutgers Student Filmed Having Sex Commits Suicide, 2 Charged with Filming,” implying that the filming was recorded. The accompanying article also claims that Ravi and Wei “posted [the video] on the Internet” and implies causation: “Tyler Clementi, 18, of Ridgewood, NJ, is believed to have jumped from the bridge last Wednesday night after learning that the images of him with a man had been streamed live on the Internet,
authorities said today” (Fenton, Calhoun, and Mangan). The temporality of “after”—intentionally or not—leads readers to believe causation was at play: Clement committed suicide because his privacy was violated and he was humiliated. Governor Christie followed in line with the logic of causation, believing that Ravi and Wei “contributed to driving that young man to that alternative” (M. Friedman, “Gov. Christie”).

Clementi’s suicide became a parable for bullying. On the day Clementi’s body was found, Steve Goldstein, chairman of Garden State Equality, issued a statement claiming that instance was a hate crime: “We are sickened that anyone in our society, such as the students allegedly responsible for making the surreptitious video, might consider destroying others’ lives as sport” (Cuomo). When Ravi was indicted in April 2011, Goldstein praised the indictment: “Without question, the indictment is in the best interests of justice and in the best interests of students across New Jersey, for their potential bullies will now think harder before demolishing another student’s life” (Geen). By this time, various celebrities had weighed in on the situation, including Ellen Degeneres, Paula Abdul, and Nicki Manaj, and Ravi had pretty much been deemed “America’s Cyberbully No. 1” (Cuomo). Within days after the news initially broke, talk show hosts and bloggers were calling for Ravi and Wei to be tried for hate crimes, and the executive director of Equality Forum, Malcolm Lazin, called for Ravi and Wei to be charged with reckless manslaughter (Hu).

The constructions of Ravi as a bully and Clementi as a suicidal victim of such bullying depends, in part, on a logic that equates Ravi with the public and Clementi with the private. Clementi’s case tapped into a cultural anxiety around the publication of private lives. The narrative that private lives or private information made “public” can kill is circulated so broadly that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton turned to cyberbullying in order to explain ethics of sharing online during a town hall in Kazakhstan in November, 2010. When asked about balancing freedom of expression and responsibility toward information, Clinton responded:
But it's also true that some information is very hurtful. We have cases in my country where teenagers went on the internet and said terrible things about other teenagers, totally lies, made up. And it’s so distressing to – it was usually girls or boys. Sometimes it was about their behavior or their character. Sometimes it was true, like to say that a young boy was gay. But that was a private matter, but they put it on the internet. And these young people have killed themselves. I mean, we’ve had a number of young people killing themselves because they felt so embarrassed, so humiliated because anything can be put on the internet. (“Town Hall”)

Publicity can kill. Or so goes the logic surrounding this case. Clinton equated homosexuality with the private, and publicity with danger. In similar ways, Clementi was equated with the private and Ravi with the cultural stigmas around publicity.

In fact, we might call Ravi a “publicity whore” based on the cultural representations of him. News reports stretched his invasion of Clementi’s privacy into a publicity event, claiming he posted a video online. When he talked with Parker, Picone suggested that Ravi was the type of person who just wanted attention from his friends, to be thought of as a “bro.” Parker contrasts Ravi and Clementi: Ravi’s “constant flutter of self-promotion and Clementi’s unswerving path to gratification” (Parker). Ravi had “a state for public regard,” with over two thousand Tweets (“twice as many as the most active of his friends”), videos uploaded and hundreds of comments on the breakdancing site Bboy, his grades and SAT scores posted on other sites. Additionally, he used Formspring, a site where users answer questions posted directly to them from anonymous users. Parker describes his attitude there as “nonchalance in the face of provocation” (Parker). Ravi is elsewhere described as “an outgoing, Ultimate Frisbee-playing techie,” whereas Clementi is “socially awkward and had only recently come out to his parents” (Dunn). Ravi himself described Clementi as “quiet all the time” with “no friends” (A. Friedman, “Text Messages”).
Mass media are not known for their nuance, and I don’t mean to simply repeat the standard critique of mass media: You got it wrong again! Rather, I mean to show that once this story became public, the mass media and their reading publics needed, in the words of Parker, “to balance a terrible event with a terrible cause.” And that cause was not just a bully, but a publicizing bully of a private, closeted victim. With Clementi equated with the private and Ravi equated with the public and publicity, readers and viewers could identify with Clementi and victimimage, universalizing the narrative. The story could serve as an allegorical warning for the potential invasion of privacy we all face, and the potential harm to our identities and individuation. For writers like Elias Aboujaoude in an online post on *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ravi’s invasion of Clementi was a warning: “none of us are immune to the ravages of the being forced to live in public” in our “post-privacy world.”

Clementi was strangely an ideal citizen. The public has largely forgotten or ignored that he was also public in some ways, with a cam4 account where he likely cammed for live audiences. Yanked out of the closet the public imagined for him, Clementi became public and suffered the worst consequence: a destruction of his identity so strong he turned to suicide. And the culprit, America’s top bully Ravi, was public and therefore dangerous: cruel and monstrous.

I’m not arguing that it’s necessarily bad that Ravi and Clementi were drawn upon as *topoi* to argue to fight against bullying. Certainly, cruelty in schools and on the Internet is pervasive, and our culture has yet to seriously address how to teach children to be kind to each other. My ethical and rhetorical concern with the framing of Ravi as a bully and as a publicist is two-fold: Readers dis-identify with being cruel, and readers dis-identify with the public. That is, readers and viewers of media discusses of Ravi and Clementi can identify with the bullied rather than admit their own possibilities of committing cruel acts. Readers identify with the private and can see the Internet as a dangerous, public place where certain others, like Ravi, commit cruel acts and invade privacy.
I see a parallel to how the torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was portrayed and handled in the media. While on a different scale and a vastly different situation, both media events tell us more about ourselves that we’d like to admit. In 2004, Slavoj Žižek argued in *In These Times* that the images from Abu Ghraib tell us more than we’d like to actually hear: We live in a culture centered on humiliation. We like to tell ourselves that our bodies are inviolate, but everywhere, we violate bodies and spaces: hazing by fraternities, sororities, and sports teams; numerous, unreported rapes on college campuses; cat-calls at women walking down the street; invasions of privacy, whether intentionally cruel or not.

In his mediation on Clementi, Richard Miller draws a parallel between responses to Ravi and responses to the Abu Ghraib images: Through quick publication of imagery and narratives, the public can draw quick conclusions and forego deliberation. Instead of investigating and deliberating what might have actually happened and who all might be implicated, the soldiers at Abu Ghraib were put on trial: “the ‘bad apples’ having been separated from the good” (Richard Miller, “Don’t Read Wikileaks”). Similarly, the public judged Ravi and Wei immediately as bullies: Their email addresses were posted online, Facebook pages were quickly made that drew in hundreds or thousands of user likes, including pages calling for them to be expelled from Rutgers, to be put on webcam for life, to be charged with hate crimes, and to be sentenced to more than five years (Miller, “Don’t Read Wikileaks”). Clementi’s case also became a useful motivation for legislature. In November 2010, the New Jersey legislature passed the “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights,” which required public schools to provide training for teachers to recognize bullying and to create “school safety teams.” While the bill had been in the works for a while, it gained momentum and exposure after Clementi’s suicide (M. Friedman, “N.J. Assembly”). In 2011 Senator Frank Lautenberg and Representative Rush Nolt, both of New Jersey, introduced the “Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act” into the United
States Congress. The bill was designed to force colleges and universities that receive federal student aid dollars to prohibit harassment ("Lautenberg").

What is troubling in the media portrayal of Ravi as a publicizing bully and Clementi as a private victim is the disavowal of any similarities readers, viewers, and speakers might have with Ravi. By depicting Ravi as a publicist, as a bully, as someone intent on “destroying others’ lives as sport” in Goldstein’s words (Cuomo), the repetitious rhetoric allowed for the continuation of a dichotomous American public: the “good” private American and the bullying, compassionless American. Few adult readers want to identify with a tormenter. When Clementi’s suicide and Ravi’s webcam activities became public in 2010, I heard and read numerous times the refrains, “How could someone do that?” and “I would never have done that!” Sympathies were with Clementi (rightly so), but no identification with Ravi.

With Clementi portrayed as the ideal citizen—private, supposed to be inviolate—and Ravi as the violator, the public could disavow their own participation in a culture of voyeurism. We all become potential Clementi’s, but no one is a Ravi. Aboujaoude’s account makes this clear, claiming, “The small inviolate zone of privacy that we all need, and that is absolutely crucial to our psychological equilibrium, has now become virtually impossible to maintain.” While he accounts numerous possible violations of privacy—parents’ logging into their children’s Facebook accounts, children hacking their parents’ email accounts, people researching potential dating partners, making blind dates no longer “blind,” people tracking their romantic partners’ web browsing out of suspicion—ultimately, Abougajaoude places the problem on recorded information: “with so many of our ‘facts’ now readily available online for anyone to Google, then cc and bcc around or stream live, control over our personal business has become a chimerical goal—and so, perhaps, has the important task of individuating.”

Aboujaoude seems right that digital culture allows for researching others and violating their privacy—but misses issues of difference and power when he claims that “none of us are
immune to the ravages of being forced to live in public.” Some of us are more immune than others—those marked as different are more susceptible to having their private lives probed in public. Privacy is not simply a universal right that has been granted to all, but rather a right that is disproportionately granted to different groups and thus not respected based on difference, particularly gendered and sexual differences. Feminist scholarship has made this evident: Catherine MacKinnon has famously claimed that “Privacy is everything women as women have never been allowed to have” (qtd. in Sedgwick 110), and Nancy Fraser explains through her analysis of the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings that “Thomas was enabled to declare key areas of his life ‘private’ and therefore off-limits,” whereas Hill’s private life was under “intense scrutiny and intrusive speculation” (105). Fraser concludes that “To be subject to having one’s privacy publicly probed is to be feminized” (107). To universalize Clementi, then, runs the risk of ignoring key aspects of difference and how difference and power play into mediated voyeurism.

**September 2010: Journalistic Inquiry and Voyeurism**

While the September 2010 *New York Times* headline read “Private Moment Made Public, Then a Fatal Jump” (Foderaro), I would speculate that the causation implied here should be reversed: a more accurate headline might read, “Fatal Jump, Then Private Moments Made Public.” Nothing was necessarily publicized beyond the 148 Twitter users following Ravi’s Twitter stream until after the news of Clementi’s suicide and Ravi and Wei’s behavior broke. Information became public as a result of attention to his suicide, and then even more information was made public. The voyeuristic impulse to understand identity and events was not limited to Ravi and Wei, but extended to the public at large. The gossip website *Gawker* was perhaps most implicated in this,
exploring and rooting out evidence of who Clementi was and what exactly transpired that September.

Not surprising, *Gawker* was at the forefront of rooting out information about Clementi after the news of his suicide broke. The site, a blog with the tag “Today’s gossip is tomorrow’s news,” devoted three posts to Clementi on September 29, 2010. *Gawker’s* self-description is important, as I speculate, following Jodi Dean, that the logic of public necessitates the rooting out of secrets and private lives. In a brief tag, *Gawker* reveals perhaps too much about the nature of publicity: gossip is news. Sissela Bok’s work on gossip, secrets, and journalism reveals the truly “quixotic” problem of journalism (254): the press has a “public mandate to probe and to expose” based on the public’s “right to know” or “right to know the truth” (254). But this right to know is quixotic both epistemologically and morally: certainly, most knowledge is out of reach, we can’t be certain of truth because of partiality, and some information and activities are morally outside the public’s right to know (say, what’s happening in my bedroom, or my private letters) (254). In technoculture, gossip becomes wrapped up in journalism. Despite Bok’s claim that gossip is spontaneous and not recorded in formal documents (91-92), it becomes recorded and communicated not through purely personal media, but through blogs and other online and offline media. (Or, perhaps, we might say that impersonal mass media has become so personalized as to break down a distinction between formal and less formal modes of communication.) This aligns with Jodi Dean’s thesis in *Publicity’s Secret* that “Publicity […] is the ideology of technoculture,” and reproduces a belief that “a democratic public is within reach” if only all secrets are revealed (10).

In the first post that morning, *Gawker* reported that Ravi and Wei had been charged for invasion of privacy, posted a screenshot of Ravi’s Twitter stream (from a web cache—Ravi had since made his Twitter account private), and speculated that Ravi and Wei’s invasion of Clementi’s privacy may have caused Clementi to commit suicide and that Ravi may have “outed
a gay kid” (O’Connor, “How a College Kid”). The same post includes a comment from “dailyoptic,” who shared a screen shot from Google’s cache of Ravi’s revised Twitter feed, with the deleted tweets removed and the new tweet asking followers to not “dare video chat” with him. A second post that afternoon confirms that police believed Clementi had committed suicide and offers the only information publicly available from Clementi’s Facebook profile: that his single Favorite Quotation is “What do you get when you kiss a guy? You get enough germs to catch pneumonia…” (O’Connor, “The Tragic Story”).

The third story, posted that evening, digs deeper into Clementi’s digital dossier after Clementi’s post on JustUsBoys was discovered. This new post differs from the previous two in two important ways: first, it was updated twice with new information that helped to confirm that the posts from JustUsBoys were indeed Clementi’s, and second, the commenters on the post mostly change tone. Whereas in the two previous posts, commenters discussed the tragedy of suicide, homophobia, or issues of privacy invasion, on this new posts, commenters mostly expressed concern that Gawker was violating Clementi’s privacy in similar ways that Ravi himself had.

The original Gawker post, before the updates, included screenshots from JustUsBoys discussion forums that included posts by “cit2mo,” who Gawker assumed to be Clementi. On September 21, “cit2mo” had started a thread titled “college roommate spying…” in which he explained that his roommate had spied on him and asked for advice. Gawker included screenshots of the initial post, a follow-up post explaining that he had gone to his RA, another post explaining that he had shut off the computer after seeing the webcam pointed at his bed, and a fourth explaining that the RA seemed to be taking him seriously. Additionally, Gawker found an account on cam4 (an amateur webcam pornography site) for “cit2mo” and posted a torso shot of the user, who seemed to match the description of Clementi (“short red hair, blue eyes,” though

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Thanks to Richard Miller’s post “Of Tweets, Timelines, and Chatroulette” for pointing this out.
the age and location didn’t match exactly). Additionally, the initial post includes links to the JustUsBoys discussion forum and cit2mo’s cam4 account—links that no longer work as I write this (Read).

The same day that Ravi and Wei were charged with invasion of privacy, Gawker writers and researchers discovered information about Clementi in order to get a more full picture of “who” he was and his life before committing suicide. Whereas earlier in the day, Gawker speculated that Ravi had outed Clementi, by the end of the day, they had evidence that he was probably out to some degree (if readers counted posting on JustUsBoys and having a cam4 account as “out”) and had a more full sense of how he responded to his privacy being violated:

Though not as bothered with his roommate’s actions as he likely should have been, cit2mo is clearly disturbed by the disregard for his privacy—and the bigoted disgust—shown by both his roommate and the people commenting on his roommate's Facebook page "with things like 'how did you manage to go back in there?' 'are you ok?'” (Read)

The post was updated twice the next day in order to confirm the accuracy with more information. First, Forbes writer Kashmir Hill confirmed that cit2mo was Clementi after finding Ravi’s tweet that linked to Clementi’s older post on JustUsBoys, and Gawker included an update with links to Hill’s article and to Clementi’s older JustUsBoys posts that Ravi had initially linked to back in August 2010. (Hill’s Forbes article included even more details from the JustUsBoys discussion board than the Gawker post [see Hill].) Second, an employee at BluMedia, owner of JustUsBoys, confirmed that the IP address for cit2mo came from Rutgers’ campus, so Gawker included another update (Read).

Many commenters on the post expressed that Gawker was violating Clementi’s privacy, calling the post “voyeurism” and “a massive invasion of privacy.” Readers especially complained because the post included a link to cit2mo’s cam4 account: “there are no journalistic ethics in
tracking down a kid's online sex activities and posting them. it's just mean.” One commenter, “peacake,” suggested that the Gawker post wasn’t much better than Ravi’s actions:

you know, it is really funny that we are so ready to demonize clementi’s roommate for posting his private activities online... but we are all so willing to look at this guy's private posts, images, read about his activities and invade his privacy ourselves. this really, really, really upsets me. are we actually any better that ravi? just cause we didn't set up the camera, or didn't search out the pictures, does that make us any less responsible?? (Read)⁹

The inventional practice of Gawker writers mirrors not just Ravi’s webcamming of Clementi, but also Ravi’s research activities before Clement and Ravi ever met. In its proairetic invention (inventional activities that are never finished, that refuse closure), Gawker sought out previously private information and activities, continued to provide more information through updates, and allowed users to comment with their suspicions and outrages about what happened or might have happened.

The Gawker post reveals that journalistic rooting out of private information is not so much different than personal searches for private information about others. Both rely on a will to truth about the other, a belief that a digital dossier about someone can provide insights about the truth of who they are and how they felt. But this truth is always revisable and always questionable because new information surfaces or because information is suspect. Some commenters on the third post express such suspicion, questioning Gawker’s claims that the JustUsBoys posts and cam4 account were conclusively Clementi’s. Commenters speculated that the posts by “cit2mo” could have been someone else going through a similar situation, a friend posting in first person to seek advice, or even multiple people posting under “cit2mo” based on different writing styles

⁹ Rather than cite individual comments separately, I cite the original post by Read. I have not edited for capitalization, punctuation, or spelling.
between posts (because one post was more formal and another had multiple ellipses). In fact, the suspicious readings run strong in the comments: One commenter speculates that as Clementi’s body had not been found, perhaps he faked his suicide. Perhaps, even, another speculates, he had been murdered (Read).

2012: Digital Evidence of Ravi’s Identity on Trial

Digital evidence was also important to jurors in their guilty decision. According to the New York Times, the “pixelated paper trail seemingly like no other” of “Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, text messages, e-mails and other online chatter” were important in implicating Ravi as purposefully invading Clementi’s privacy, intimidating him, and tampering with evidence (Halbfinger and Kormanik). While trials often include a mixture of testimony and documented evidence, this trial was perhaps marked by its peculiar reliance on digital evidence and how this evidence seemed to trump verbal testimony—in part because some testimony was unavailable, most notably Clementi’s, but also someone to corroborate Ravi’s claim that he had a friend in high school who was gay. While the jury was quick to convict Ravi on invading privacy, and the textual evidence added up to a fairly easy conviction on tampering with evidence and a witness, the charges of bias intimidation took the most deliberation for the jury (Halbfinger and Kormanik). Ultimately, the bias intimidation charges seem to hinge on two areas of deliberation: Did Clementi feel intimidated because he was gay? And what kind of person was Ravi?

The first question relied on textual evidence because clearly Clementi wasn’t there for himself. The stream of evidence discussed above (his email to his resident assistant, screen shots of Ravi’s Twitter stream, the digital log of him viewing Ravi’s Twitter account 38 times in his last two days alive) was enough for jurors to determine that he did indeed feel bullied. The question of Ravi’s character too depended on such textual evidence, mostly because of a lack of
witness testimony that would have supported Ravi’s claim that he was not homophobic. As juror
Lynn Audet explained, “The friend he claimed was a good friend in high school, that person was
never presented as a defense witness. If that person had come forward and said, ‘Hey, we’ve been
good friends, and he knows I’m gay and he doesn’t have a problem with it,’ that might have
swayed me in the other direction” (Halbfinger and Kormanik). Unfortunately for Ravi, his
personal claim that he was not homophobic was undermined by the digital traces against him.

Thus far, I have shown how identity is a fragmented series of private or semi-private
digital traces online, information and activities recorded in various contexts that can be assembled
through aggregation or searches by users. These activities and information online once might be
private, harder for others to obtain, and more secure. But information and activities recorded in
digital environments, even when private in some way, can be used and assembled. The logic of
understanding someone’s identity through external traces is used by various people, as they turn
to the Internet to paint pictures of them. I have also shown how popular media, particularly digital
media, use digital evidence in order to root out and understand who someone is and what
happened. These actions are examples of proairetic invention, as closure is resisted as more and
more information is found, and as others collaboratively help to build a story (Ravi and his friend
Tam, or the contributors to Gawker). Now, in the courtroom, when a singular sense of one’s
identity is on trial, digital evidence is once again at play to be juxtaposed against one’s claims
about oneself.

Ravi claimed before, during, and after the trial that he is not homophobic and has gay
friends. (And perhaps this is true; my sense is that Clementi was a victim more because he was
socially awkward and viewed as not as affluent, and because M.B. was older, a suspect outsider

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10 After the trial, Ravi said in an interview, "One of my friends had a gay roommate and I met a
gay kid I liked a lot at orientation. They were cool. It was no big deal. Now there’s a verdict out
there that says I hate gays. The jury has decided they know what is going on in my mind, [sic]
They can tell you what you think” (Dilonno).
in a residence hall—but this is speculation based on mediated evidence removed from the trial room). Ravi was able to provide witnesses who supported him that he was not homophobic. While several Rutgers students testified at the trial that Ravi had told them about the webcam, none expressed that he was homophobic (Mulvihill). Those who had watched the webcam with Wei all testified that Ravi hadn’t said anything homophobic; they were all more “scandalized” by the age of M.B. (Solomon, “Webcam Witness”). Rutgers student Alvin Artha testified that Ravi was more concerned about M.B.’s age and appearance than about Clementi being gay. Cassandra Cicco explained that Ravi “said he didn’t have an issue with homosexuals and in fact, he had a really good friend who was a homosexual” (A. Friedman, “Witnesses Testify”).

Although his friends and acquaintances testified that Ravi wasn’t explicitly homophobic, this wasn’t enough to prove that he actually did have gay friends or didn’t target Clementi in part because he was homosexual. And the digital evidence mounted that perhaps homophobia played a role: his tweet celebrating catching Clementi kissing a guy, his texts and tweets inviting others to watch Clementi with a guy over, his chat records from before school started showing he was a bit repulsed with having a gay roommate, his text message records showing disgust.\textsuperscript{11} Taken in isolation, any one of these pieces might not have convinced the jury that Ravi intended to intimidate Clementi based on his sexuality. But assembled together, the picture becomes pretty damning.

In many ways, then, Ravi’s trial can be understood not only as a trial of his actions, but a trial of his person, of his identity. Continually, the defense tried to counter the image painted by the prosecution. After the trial was over, Ravi’s attorney explained why he didn’t plea bargain:

\textsuperscript{11} The prosecution’s case rested in part that “Dharun Ravi had determined that his future roommate was gay and he had engaged also in extensive instant messaging chats with friends that document his concern and displeasure, if not alarm, over that discovery” (“Counter-Statement of Facts”). After he and Wei saw Clementi kissing M.B. over the webcam, Ravi and Huang texted about the experience. He wrote, among other messages, “Yeah keep the gays away” and engaged with Huang, who joked about M.B. possibly coming for him (Winch, “Defendant in Rutgers Trial”).
“They wanted him to plead guilty to being a hatemonger, homophobic and antigay, and he wasn’t going to do it” (Zernike).

Conclusion

Weaving throughout the Clementi/Ravi case—before they met, during the week of Clementi’s suicide, throughout the media coverage, and during Ravi’s trial—digitized private activities and information, recorded in various locations online or on digital devices, were collected as evidence for rhetors to construct others’ identities. In our digital age, identities are externalized, documented fragments to be accessed and assembled by others in order to “know” people. This rooting out of identities depends on a belief that digital evidence will provide the “truth” about others—though often, some degree of doubt exists and interpretations of identity seem revisable. Importantly, as I’ve show, this mediated voyeurism is often social, conducted in concert with others, whether it is a personal search or a journalistic search. Also, identities in a way become secrets, not just secrets to be found, but secrets to be kept from those we research. We “know” others through their digital dossiers, but we do not let them know we know.

If rhetoric can be understood as the acts of disclosing, keeping secret, publicizing, and being reticent, as Edwin Black argues, then, as I show in this chapter, rhetorical scholars need to attend to the cultural logics of seeking out information in a digital culture where so many digital activities are recorded, persist, found, and assembled. Ravi’s voyeurism into Clementi’s life isn’t an isolated case of a teenager violating his roommate’s privacy, but is part of a larger cultural logic that implicates many Internet users: The desire to know more about others, to investigate, to root out secrets.

What is perhaps most concerning about my accounts in this chapter is the evidenced lack of trust in others and trust instead in digital media. Susan Miller describes rhetoric as a sort of
habituated or learned trust in texts, a trust that “derives from a shared education” (152), and Dennis Baron shows how readers and writers develop both internal and external mechanisms to develop trust in new media (113). Similarly, we seem to have developed a way to trust in digital media, perhaps more than print media or even physically present (or potentially) people. It seems, despite the repeated lesson “Don’t believe everything you read online,” that the Internet and digitally documented evidence believe for us, before we even meet people. We trust this information, at least to a degree, and are more suspicious of people and their knowledge. (Thus, perhaps, the impulse to look something up on a smart phone or computer when you don’t believe something a face-to-face interlocutor claims.) Strangers or unknown people are particularly worth researching because they can’t be trusted. A 2012 commercial for a website plays on this fear of strangers online. In it, various users of online dating sites attest to their fears that whoever they are meeting online might not be trustworthy, and that they can’t know who this person actually is. One single mother in the commercial expresses that she needs to know if the guy she is meeting is safe to also be in her child’s life. The website advertised allows users to look up information about a potential date—in effect, who he or she really is. We can’t trust others’ claims about themselves in clearly fabricated situations, such as online dating ads, and instead have to turn to either documented information about them, or sites they engage in that appear to present their “apparently real and unguarded lives” (Calvert 3).

This distrust of present bodies seems to be expanding, to the point that even print documentation might not suffice in some cases as evidence of identity. As I explained above, drawing on Poster, documentation developed as an externalized fragment of one’s identity. One such documentation, the ID, seems to be losing validity in some contexts, trumped instead by digital documentation. (Though IDs are clearly still trusted strongly, as is evidenced by an increasing number of voter ID laws.) Some United Kingdom bars started asking patrons to log into their Facebook accounts from their smartphones in order to verify that they were who their
photo ID said they were. Claiming that it was increasingly hard to verify whether a photo ID was real or faked, bouncers began this practice in order to prevent underage patrons from entering and avoid fines (Biyani).

Those readers who use Facebook might scoff at such a practice, knowing it is incredibly easy to create a fake Facebook account, or at the very least, to fake a birthdate on a real one. (In fact, one of the problems with recent U.S. laws to protect children, like the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, which requires youth to be at least 13 before having online accounts, is that parents become complicit in helping their children fake their age on an account [see Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz, and Palfrey].) But there is also a strong belief that users are presenting their real, unguarded selves on these sites, and they can tell us something about who that person is. This is supported by psychological research that suggests that young users of Facebook present their actual personalities on these sites, instead of idealized ones (Back et al.)—though personality shouldn’t necessarily be conflated with identity. And of course, Facebook and sites like it encourage the presentation of the real. Facebook requires your real name and users often expect their friends to be real (unlike MySpace, which often had fake accounts of a variety of sorts).

The trust in digital media can be partially explained by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s theory of remediation, wherein media are represented in other media, working under the double logic of “contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy” (5). That is, media work to efface their mediated nature while simultaneously becoming hypermediated. While hypermedia increases, immediacy also increases: the two are mutually dependent (6). Immediacy depends on the belief that there is “some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents” (30). Social media seems to elicit a belief in the realness of its content (often, not always) because of this hypermediacy that produces immediacy. Barbara Warnick argues in Rhetoric Online that ethos and credibility are shifting online, from an author-based credibility to a
credibility that is judged in context—based on the site’s purpose, the purpose of a search, evidence on the site (both content and technological, like loading time), and the site’s field, and how that field influences users’ determination of credibility (45-67). Similarly, social media sites are deemed credible, or “real” evidence of others’ lives, on how immediate they feel. The content isn’t the sole criterion for judgment, but rather how the site seems to encourage some sort of “unguarded life.” Thus, a dating site might not be read as credible, or as “real,” as a site like Facebook. Despite the expectation that one will present their real self, there is also a concern that on a dating site, users are trying to put their best face forward, or hiding flaws—in short, trying to “sell” themselves. On a site like Facebook, however, users are expected to “really” interacting with each other.

Perhaps the repercussions go further than simply an increased trust in digital media as conveying the “real,” as the expectation for digital evidence to authenticate the self creates yet another digital divide. The trust in digital media over print and over present bodies means that we now distrust those who cannot authenticate themselves with digital media. And a lack of a Facebook account could be interpreted as even less trustworthy: Someone without a Facebook account with at least minimal public availability (a profile picture and their name) surely has something to hide!

In the last chapter, I explored the uses of digital devices to create zones of privacy in social situations. While using digital devices in these spaces has many different possible contexts and effects, I also speculated that there is perhaps a fear of vulnerability or intimacy involved in using digital devices in some situations. The desire to “know” the other through their digital traces rather than through face-to-face conversations may belie a fear of vulnerability as well. We can judge someone as worth getting to know before opening up to them. In the next chapter, I turn to intimacy—a state or behavior that depends on being vulnerable—and digital actions that make users vulnerable: sexting. The mass mediated responses to sexting and the public pedagogy
of intimacy related to sexting show a different ethical response than the response to Ravi.

Whereas Ravi was a bully, a tormenter, and Clementi shared no culpability, the public places responsibility for protecting sexual images on young girls, telling them to just not sext. Rather than a discussion of ethics and situated rhetorical procedures (e.g., what to do and not do with others’ images), we see a mandate to protect oneself—another cultural fear of vulnerability.
Chapter 4

“When Privates Go Public”: The Public Pedagogy of Digitized Intimacy

Figure 4-1: The cover of the May 2009 issue of Reader’s Digest (Source: Matt M., Flickr, Creative Commons, http://www.flickr.com/photos/macq/3485243622)

The May 2009 cover of Reader’s Digest featured an iPhone with the typical display (rows of icons for apps) replaced with the bold text, “Parent Alert: Is Your Child Sexting?” The bold, red
text, the alarm of “Parent Alert,” and the superimposed words onto the interface of the iPhone taps into and raises adult anxieties about youth’s sexual activity—anxiety made all the stronger by recent convergences of technologies and practices for mobile phones that allow for images and videos to be sent over wifi, cellular, or other mobile networks. Because of increasing network speeds and software developments on mobile phones, text messaging has increasingly taken on some qualities of social media: Many users can now send a message or image to multiple people, or engage in group text messaging in ways that remediate group chat clients. Convergent practices on phones also allow for images that have been texted to be emailed or to be posted on social media sites like Twitter or Facebook.

Teenage “sexting” captured national attention and became the subject of a national moral panic in 2008 and 2009 when stories began surfacing of teenage girls being the subject of online and in-person bullying after sexually provocative or naked pictures of them had circulated throughout their schools. In a few instances, these young women turned to suicide because of the extreme bullying. For example, in September 2009, Hillsborough, Florida, middle school student Hope Witsell committed suicide after being bullied because a nude image of her had circulated throughout her school. In June, she had sent a boy she liked a picture of her breasts, and, according to students at the school, that picture had been forwarded and within hours had circulated throughout the school. Soon, she was shamed and bullied in school, ostracized by

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1 Ironically, in May 2009 the iPhone was not yet capable of sending image or video files. Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) was not available on the iPhone until September 2009. Reader’s Digest choice to use the iPhone is perhaps because of its recognizable status in the popular imagination: It is perhaps the iconic smart phone.

2 According to Wikipedia, the first use of the portmanteau “sexting” was in an Australian newspaper in 2005, referring to the sending of sexually explicit text and images via Short Message Service (SMS) or Multimedia Message Service (MMS) (“Sexting”). Since then, the term has developed a number of broader definitions, ranging from the limited sending of nude or semi-nude photos via text to the more broad definition of sending any content deemed sexual in nature—text, image, or video—via any digital service or device.
many and called a “slut” and a “whore,” leading to self-cutting and her suicide that fall. Witsell’s was the second known sexting-related suicide in the country (Meacham).

Witsell is not alone in being the target of bullying, shaming, and stigma after a nude or semi-nude image of her was forwarded to her classmates. Redbook’s November 2011 issue featured a story about “Taylor” (a pseudonym), a teenage girl in Ohio who was pressured into sending a classmate a video of her stripping. He soon forwarded the video on, resulting in her teammates ostracizing her, being called “nasty” and a “slut” in the hallways. Even her siblings were harassed, as her seven-year-old sister was asked, “Isn’t your sister the stripper?” Taylor’s grades fell, and her parents eventually pulled her from the school, enrolling her in an online school before she was accepted in a new school district (Fernández 111-114). In 2010, Washington state eighth grader Margarite’s ex-boyfriend Isaiah forwarded a full-length nude picture of her to someone else, who then forwarded the image to many others with the message “Ho Alert! If you think this girl is a whore, then text this to all your friends.” Within hours, in the middle of the night, Margarite was harassed by text messages from boys she barely knew (Hoffman). In another example, Autumn, one of the central figures in the educational video The Dangers of Sexting, was bullied and shamed after her boyfriend got upset with her and forwarded a picture of her on his cell phone, which spread around the school. As with Taylor, Autumn was unable to escape the bullying and shaming behavior at her school until she left.

Important for my discussion in this chapter, Hope Witsell seemed to have blamed herself for the bullying. According to the Tampa Bay Times, Witsell’s friends believe she thought that “the biggest mistakes made were her own.” One of her friends said, “She didn’t blame it on anybody. . . . She realized it was her fault for sending them in the first place” (Meacham). As I explore the moral panic and public pedagogy around sexting in this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that these three girls committed no moral crime: they had simply sent a sexual image or video to a boy because they liked him, wanted him to like her, or were in a relationship.
However, the recipients forwarded the images or video to others, and the girls became a target of bullying and shame. They had been objectified in a way that denied their subjectivity. As Martha Nussbaum explains in her categorization of objectification, objectification involves the reduction of someone to a thing or object. One way to treat another person as a thing is to deny her subjectivity, to treat “the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account” (“Objectification” 70). This can go further, becoming “subjectivity-violation, in which pleasure is taken in invading and colonizing the person’s inner world” (72). Through these objectifying behaviors—denying a girl’s privacy by forwarding an image, shaming her as a slut, and thus denying her feelings and even invading her inner life to the point that she is distracted from friendships, school, and everyday life—others in the school shame the girls, conferring upon them “a stigmatized, spoiled identity” (73; see also Goffman).

This chapter explores the public pedagogy and moral panic surrounding sexting as it plays out in national media and two 2010 pedagogical videos, MTV’s Sexting in America: When Privates Go Public and educational resource company Human Relations Media’s The Dangers of Sexting: What Teens Need to Know. As I’ll explore below, this public pedagogy works through a rhetoric of risk that privileges protecting oneself over intimacy and vulnerability, thereby placing as much blame if not more on those who take the risk of sexting than those who violate others’ privacy by forwarding on sexting pictures. Henry Giroux defines public pedagogy as “education produced outside the schools” in sites such as the entertainment industry, sports media, the Internet, and advertising (The Abandoned Generation 38). As he explains, “Dominant public pedagogy with its narrow and imposed schemes of classification and limited modes of identification uses the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency” (Border Crossings 5). While Giroux uses this concept to forward powerful critiques of neoliberalism and the privatization of citizenship, I am interested in how the public pedagogy of mediated intimacy helps to reinforce a sexual hierarchy in which young women are blamed for
taking risks to their privacy and others are not nearly as responsible for violating young women’s privacy.

That sexual pedagogy classifies people and works through identification that affects agency is not a new argument. In Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong, an excellent rhetorical analysis of safe sex education during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s, Cindy Patton shows how HIV prevention education taught certain subject positions to have different attitudes toward risky sexual behavior. White (supposedly straight) adolescents were taught compassion and understanding toward those with HIV and AIDS, and were not necessarily taught how to evaluate and reduce their own risk (36). The two exceptions to this approach of compassion in the national pedagogy were gay youth “responsible for their own fate” (56) and youth of color, figured as premodern lost causes (57-61). In effect, heterosexual white youth were viewed as innocent and didn’t get educated about risks, gay youth had to turn to learning “on the job” from older gay men, and young people of color were viewed as virtual adults who can’t be reached (62). My analysis in this chapter takes a similar approach about the categorization and treatment of certain groups of youth in this public pedagogy, though the lines drawn are along gender rather than race.

News stories between 2009 and 2011 often reported on research studies conducted about teenagers and young adults and their sexting behaviors, showing that somewhere between 15% and 48% of teenage participants had sent or received a sexually explicit text message or image—a range that is broad and seems ridiculous because definitions, survey populations, and questions in these surveys vary so much (Lenhart 3; “Sex and Tech” 1). These reported numbers, at least when high, are meant to appeal to and heighten the anxieties of adult viewers and readers about the sexual activity of youth with mobile phones. Other headlines attest to the “danger” and scariness of this new communication phenomenon, revealing adult anxieties and confusion as to why youth would engage in such behavior. Such headlines include NPR’s “Sexting: A Disturbing New
Teen Trend” (Joffe-Walt); *Wired* magazine’s “‘Sexting’ and Texting Teens Need Parental Control” (Silver); NPR’s “Teens Aren’t Just Texting, They’re ‘Sexting’” on *Tell Me More*; Slate magazine’s “Textual Misconduct: What To Do about Teens and Their Dumb Naked Photos of Themselves” (Lithwick); *Wall Street Journal*’s “Why Do Teens Engage in ‘Sexting’?” (Shellenbarger); and the Associated Press’s “Think Your Kid Is Not ‘Sexting’? Think Again…” (Martinez). And that’s just a sampling. These headlines, and their accompanying stories, appeal to, reinforce, and raise adult anxieties about the secret (and perhaps now not so secret) sexual, digital lives of teenagers.

This popular anxiety around teen sexting behaviors is part of a moral panic that blames youth for their “stupid” decisions. Following scholars such as Kenneth Thompson, Jeffrey Weeks, and Gayle Rubin, I understand moral panics as moments when some aspect of society is identified as a threat to the social order, and those credited with authority—whether they be politicians, clergy, mainstream mass media, or educators—create a campaign of scapegoating the defined threat and make a call to action in order to reorganize society and make it “safe” again. These campaigns or crusades appeal to those who believe there has been a breakdown in social order, a breakdown that may be imagined and based on an idealized social order, as much as it may be real. Moral panics then mobilize these anxieties for action, yet, ultimately, the real causes of social problems are left unaddressed (Thompson 3, 8-9; Weeks 14; Rubin 297). Moral panics often pit older social norms and values against new practices, creating a dichotomy of “good” old practices and “bad” new practices, which makes it difficult to provide context and nuance to newer practices. Youth and new technologies have been frequent targets of moral panics. Thompson’s analyses of moral panics, for example, includes various youth cultures who have been understood to be at risk or to be the source of risk for society: Mods and Rockers in the 1960s (Ch. 2); club cultures and raves in the 1980s and ‘90s (50-56); and child-on-child violence, which was blamed in part on violent movies watched at home (95-102). New technological
developments and practices have also been targets of moral panics, as violent VHS movies watched at home by kids without parental supervision were for child-on-child violence in the 1990s (Thompson 102-110). Other targets have included sexual content and violence in video games (Ess, Chapter 5), and the use of mobile phones by youth for bullying, their involvement in the decline of cultural values, and a decline in youth literacy (Goggin, Chapter 6). Sex and sexuality too has played a central role in many panics, including the AIDS crisis and moral panics about sex on television and films (Thompson, Chapters 5 and 8). Since youth, technologies, and sex are often the targets of moral panics, the confluence of teenager technological freedom and the new visibility of teenager sexuality through circulating digital images an easy target for a moral panic surrounding sexting.

In the moral panic surrounding sexting, the targeted problem is teenagers’ (particularly girls’) sexuality and technological freedom. While news stories and experts admit that teenagers have always and will always explore their sexuality, stories frequently argue that they are not yet able to handle the technological freedom of making quick decisions while texting on their phones. Teenagers “may be as tech-savvy as Bill Gates but as gullible as Bambi” (Lithwick), vulnerable to peer pressure because they “are not quite mature enough to make good decisions consistently” (Martinez). The solution, then, is to educate teens to not sext through parental guidance and control, and sometimes legal and educational intervention.

In this chapter, I reframe sexting from the dominant media narrative: Instead of casting it as an already “stupid” decision, I cast it as a literate and rhetorical activity involving a quick kairotic moment of intimacy. In the following section, I outline what I mean by intimacy: a moment of vulnerability in which one makes oneself open to others, a giving up of privacy in a way. I then turn to teenage mobile phone usage in order to provide some context for sexting before discussing sexting practices and attitudes. Drawing on survey data, I explore the various reasons for and attitudes toward sexting, arguing that sexting needs to be understood as a kairotic
moment that takes into account the quick, in-the-moment decision to sext and consideration of long-term effects. However, this does not make sexting solely a matter of risk-assessment, as sexting also involves nonrational desires, making it a complex activity situated in a variety of different contexts.

Ultimately, the moral panic around sexting serves as an example for our culture’s rhetorical construction of ethics: As an ethics of risk aversion rather than of vulnerability and care. With the increased ease in spreading information, we have developed a public ethic of blaming those who take risks, rather than an ethic of being vulnerable to each other. This rhetoric of risk targets girls and women especially, blaming them for their vulnerability instead of targeting the misogyny that leads young people to forward on sexual images and videos to others and leads to bullying in schools. My analysis is not new, but is situated in a long history of feminist critiques of patriarchy that, among other things, blames women for what they wear and how they behave rather than the men who rape, assault, and harass them and the culture that condones it.

My analysis of the public pedagogy of sexting shows how a rhetoric of risk encourages a “just say no” to sexting mentality that places the ethical responsibility on young girls to avoid sexting and avoids a discussion of sexual shaming and the ethics of violating girls’ privacy. Additionally, as I explain, the moral panic works through disproportionate legal punishment for young women who sext compared to those who forward an image on. Sexting becomes hard to imagine as intimate actions that could be useful for youth in part because of how agency is construed in the pedagogy of this moral panic: sexting is stupid and shouldn’t be done, and the ethics of respecting girls’ privacy is nearly absent. I close this chapter by exploring the implications for the public pedagogy of sexting: Privacy has not yet been fully conferred to women as it has been to men, leaving women responsible for protecting themselves. Additionally, an obsession with understanding teenage sexting as child pornography turns parents, school
administrators, and legal authorities into monitoring agents who must think like pedophiles, reading sexuality onto images that might have different meanings for others and thus be harmless.

What is Intimacy?

Understanding sexting as intimacy can be difficult because vernacular theories of intimacy conceptualize it as a long-term condition of a relationship, most often between two people, something that is developed over time and achieved, and often as something that is done face-to-face. However, I want to advance an understanding of intimacy as a kairotic moment of making oneself vulnerable to another. Intimacy can be hard to recognize at times because of the ways in which long-term relationships (particularly committed or married couples) are seen as the ideal and paradigmatic form of intimacy. Because of this ideal—mediated by opinion culture, by novels, and by romances—certain acts of intimacy are often read as self-exploitation, selfish behavior, anonymous sex, or stupid indulgences. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain, for example, how the romantic ideal of coupled intimacy leads people to think that public gay sex has no intimacy and is selfish, self-destructive, and anonymous (559-561). Similarly, it is hard to recognize sexting as an intimate practice, as making oneself vulnerable to another, because it does not fit into the narrative of long-term intimacy.

Another reason that it’s hard to recognize certain digital practices like sexting as intimate is that intimacy is often understood as face-to-face and reciprocal. Sherry Turkle privileges face-to-face, reciprocal relationships for creating intimacy, defining it as “about being with people in person, hearing their voices and seeing their faces, trying to know their hearts” (288). In their overview and synthesis of psychological literature on intimacy, Jean-Philippe Laurenceau and Brighid M. Kleinman also privilege face-to-face and reciprocal intimacy. They critique individualistic views of intimacy that focus solely on a single individual’s feelings as “decidedly
one-sided” and failing to take into account the other person’s feelings (644), and their discussion ignores media, focusing on verbal and non-verbal face-to-face communication with another co-present human.

I argue, however, that intimacy does not have to be face-to-face, nor reciprocal. Intimacy can instead be impersonal, that is, not a personal relationship, but a vulnerability to another person or object. We can, for instance, be vulnerable while reading a book, not only entering the world of the book, but letting the ideas of the book enter our private world and altering us. I follow Tim Dean here in understanding intimacy as the breaking down of boundaries. He argues for “impersonal intimacy” that “disentangles intimacy from personhood and the epistemological imperative to know the other” (Unlimited Intimacy 47). The belief that intimacy requires knowing another and empathy is a powerful one, which is why Turkle is so upset by intimacy with robots in Alone Together. The problem with intimacy with robots for Turkle is that they do not offer “alterity, the ability to see the world through the eyes of another. Without alterity, there can be no empathy” (55). I argue that intimacy does not require knowing the other and does not need to lead to empathy: It requires a breaking down of one’s privacy, of making oneself vulnerable in a moment.

Privacy is a necessary aspect of our lives in order to develop intimacy, as various scholars on privacy have argued. As Charles Fried and Robert Gerstein both argue, privacy is a necessary component for intimacy: Without it, we would not have the ability to decide what and with whom to share aspects of ourselves. Privacy, by affording the protection of the self, also allows for the development of personal relationships through intimacy (Nagel 9). Privacy is necessary for social relations: It creates distance between people, which then allows for autonomy and the ability to decide what to reveal to certain people in certain situations, allowing for intimacy (Murphy 35-36, 52). Privacy then allows for the building of boundaries—intimate relationships with people or objects means being vulnerable, breaking down those information, bodily, or spatial boundaries.
Intimacy requires the giving up of certain types of privacy—informational privacy, spatial privacy, or bodily privacy—in order to let down borders between you and someone or something else. Intimacy thus is the opening up of oneself to another, of being vulnerable, of denying, even momentarily, one’s own boundaries between the self and another person or object. In this way, sexting is can be understood as intimate: By sending another a picture of my naked self, I am making myself vulnerable to that person, breaking down social boundaries between us. This intimacy during sexting can be incredibly momentary—just the brief moment of sending the image. Or it can be more long term, part of a longer exchange of images and messages that help to develop a sexual relationship. I’m not arguing that all sexting is intimate, of course: Sexting can be non-intimate and instead cruel, when people forward someone else’s image on, for instance; in these instances of forwarding an image on, vulnerability is violated. Rather, I am arguing that sexting as a literate activity needs to be understood as an aspect of a rhetorical context.

I anticipate an objection to understanding sexting as intimate based on the grounds that it might be self-exploitation, what Reader’s Digest writer Judith Newman calls “creating child pornography” and becoming part “of the vast pornopolis of American culture.” The logic behind this claim is that to share naked images of oneself, one must be disrespecting the integrity of one’s body, the ownership of your own body. To this logic, I have two responses: First, sexual intimacy often requires the breaking down of one’s own body, an objectification of sorts. Nussbaum explains that objectification is not always ethically bad. Arguing against Kant and Catherine MacKinnon’s claims that reducing a person to an object is “never morally appropriate,” Nussbaum writes that we should instead look at the context: “The overall context of an instance of objectification may justify the conclusion that the behavior, though certainly involving objectification, is not morally objectionable, and it may even be wonderful, involving an embrace of the body that often eludes us in daily life” (“Objectification” 71). That is, sexual intimacy
cannot be rejected solely because objectification is involved; Nussbaum’s argument is that sexual objectification should be judged in context and may be morally neutral. (As Nussbaum explains, Kant thinks sex must always be morally bad because of objectification [70-71]). Dean also adds that sexual desire “impersonalizes” the body: Sexual desire is rooted in the “fragmenting effects of language on the body” (Unlimited Intimacy 160). Sexually, we desire objects, parts of bodies. Thus, objectification is not in and of itself bad, and the sending of a sexual image—whether the whole body or parts of it—is not in and of itself bad, and may help to facilitate intimacy.

Second, intimacy often craves a witness, and in the case of sexting, the visual can serve as a witness to the mediated intimacy between two people. That people desire witnesses—either personal or impersonal—for intimacy is nothing new; marriage is perhaps the most recognized form of witnessing intimacy. In his argument against marriage as a state institution, Michael Warner explains that one reason that state marriage is so desired is that the intimate relationship of a couple craves a witness, and the state has become the expected witness to such intimacy in order to grant it legitimacy (The Trouble With Normal 103). But for other types of witnessing, people are increasingly turning to screens as a type of witness for their intimacy. In his ethnographic work on barebacking subcultures, Tim Dean explains that barebacking intimacy seeks out a witness through pornography, using the technologies of video to chronicle and witness intimate moments (Unlimited Intimacy 96). Screens, then, can provide a witness to the intimacy being developed between people. In this way, taking a nude or sexualized picture of oneself and sending it to a partner can be a form of using a screen to witness and document developing intimacy.

By understanding sexting as a potentially intimate moment, I want to challenge the narrative that sexting is simply a stupid behavior by teenagers that shows that they are disrespecting their bodies. Instead, sexting might be understood as a moment of mediated vulnerability, the sharing of one’s private physical self. In this way, we shouldn’t see sexting as
moral bad, but rather as a way in which some teenagers might be using cell phones in order to explore their sexual relationships with others. Of course, I am not arguing that there isn’t bad sexting; certainly, we should be critical of forwarded sexts that disrespect others’ privacy and coerced requests for sexts that disrespects another’s autonomy (the type of objectification that uses “a woman as a mere means to the objectifier’s ends” [Nussbaum, “Objectification” 70]). Instead, sexting in some contexts can be a healthy use of technology to develop intimacy. I should also be clear that I am not arguing that teenagers should sext: Stating that something is good for some people does not make it an imperative for all.

Convergences and Affordances of Mobile Phones and Teenage Use

Mobile phones have become, in many ways, a commonplace in North American culture, and even worldwide. They are attached to our bodies and with many of us at all moments, and even lie charging next to many as they sleep at night (also serving as alarm clocks). Developments in the 21st century that allow users to browse the web, play music, send text messages, use social networking apps, play games, or video chat have helped to centralized cell phones as an integral aspect of many people’s social lives. These developments—unimaginable when the first radio telephones were developed in the 1920s and used for police dispatch and communication (Goggin 25) and certainly not possible when mobile phones hit mass markets in the early 1980s—combined with the size and portability of the devices and decreased costs, allow for two important cultural aspects of mobile phones that have made them ideal technologies for teenager use and sociability: convergence and personalization. This section overviews these two aspects of mobile phones and briefly explores youth cell phone culture, particularly focusing on texting and photos. Youth own and use cell phones at a higher rate than most other communication

3 For a history of the development of mobile phones, see Goggin, Chapter 2.
technologies—roughly three-quarters of teenagers aged 12-17 owned cell phones in 2009 (Lenhart 2)—and girls and young women are particularly frequent and adept users of mobile phones, a reversal in digital technology trends that tend to favor or promote use by boys and men over girls and women. Because cell phones have become so integrated into teenagers’ social lives, and because cell phone usage provides a communication medium outside the purview of parents’ and teachers’ surveillance, they have become an easy target for moral panics.

Cell phones are particularly anxiety inducing because of the convergences of various technologies, realms of life, and practices that had previously been imagined as separate. In many ways, smart phones are emblematic of technological convergence, as various technologies and practices are brought together on one device, including phone calls, web browsing, picture taking, social networking through apps, playing games, video chatting, reading, file sharing, emailing, and more. Photographs and video capabilities are particularly important in this convergence, especially for teenagers, who are often avid photographers with their cell phones. The first phone with camera capabilities was produced and marketed by Japanese manufacturer Kyocera in 1999. While it was novel for allowing video chat, the phone was heavier than other mobile phones. Other camera phones, smaller, much more portable, and with cellular capabilities, quickly followed in Japan, so that by 2004, 60 percent of mobile phones in Japan had camera capabilities (Goggin 144). As Gerard Goggin explains, the fact that cell phones are constantly with users means that photography practices could change: Photography could focus more on the everyday, taking a demotic turn that allowed for more pictures of everyday practices and experiences, in contrast to how traditional cameras with film more typically used for special occasions (145-148).

Convergences on the mobile phone—no longer a device for calling, but also for texting, with a graphical user interface, camera lens (if not two lenses), large digital storage space, and wifi or 3G or 4G connectivity—have afforded the abilities to quickly and easily take pictures and videos, store thousands of them, and share them online or via text.
As small devices that are easily carried on the body, mobile phones can be highly personalized and stylized, including the brand, color, ring tones, and ornamentation (Campbell and Park 373). In many ways, mobile phones’ affordances allow for the understanding of the device “as extensions of the self” (372). Goggin attributes the development of cell phones as personalized and related to identity to a change in cell phone design by Nokia in 1994: Instead of simply a square, box-shaped device, Nokia began designing cell phones for particular tastes: more rounded, elliptically-shaped designs that attracted users interested in how their phones matched their fashion. Four years later, Nokia introduced its sleek 8860, which Vogue magazine would call “the first fashion phone” (Goggin 46). With the ability to purchase a phone model that matches one’s fashion, buy accessories and cases for mobile phones, change settings on smart phones, download apps geared toward users’ needs and wants, and store, display, and share personal photos, mobile phones have become markers and displays of identity and personality. Youth in particular have taken to mobile phones: the personalization and ability to have a sense of control over communication outside the purview of adult supervision allows them a sense of freedom and independence, as well as the ability to develop and strengthen social ties (Campbell and Park 379-380).

Issues of convergence and personalization mean that mobile phones have become integral social devices for teenagers. Teenagers have particularly picked up on the texting capabilities of cell phones in order to communicate with friends and parents. Texting has become nearly ubiquitous amongst teenagers, and seems to be a growing activity. In 2006, only 51% of teenagers were texting, but by 2010, 72% of teenagers were (Lenhart et al 2). The typical teenager receives and sends an average of 50 texts per day, for a total of about 1500 texts per month (31).

Texting has several attractions for mobile phone users: It is generally cheap (at least with a texting plan), quick, and convenient (in that it can be done in most situations). Texting also has
the added benefit of being inconspicuous—or at least more inconspicuous than talking on a phone
(Ling, The Mobile Connection 150). Additionally, texts allow for the management of
communication, as a text does not demand immediate attention because it is asynchronous. Thus,
text messages can be managed and responded to when one is prepared, ready, or less distracted.
And the asynchronous nature of texts means that they can be edited before being sent, and users
can manipulate delays in their responses in order to add a sense of urgency, noncommittal, or
other temporary aspect to a message (151).

In addition to texting, youth are picking up on the affordances of mobile phones as
personal cameras. Teenagers report that cell phones are not just for calling and texting anymore:
A vast majority of teenage cell phone owners use their phones to take pictures, and a majority
then share those photos with others (Lenhart et al 5).

And much like sexting, texting itself has been the target of moral panics. In his discussion
of what he calls “mobile panics,” Goggin explores how cell phones are attributed with a decline
in literacy (because youth are now becoming accustomed to “text speak”) and to sociability.
Mainstream media report that youth’s texting practices are leaking over into their other literacy
practices, including their essays for school, and that youth are using cell phones, including
texting, photos, and videos on their phones, to bully other youth (115-123). While these moral
panics “focus on the deadly power of the cell phone,” they rarely call attention to other
sociopolitical and cultural factors that influence behaviors, including the role of “old media” in
affecting behavior (125). In a wonderful example, Goggin explains that Australian mainstream
media, police officials, and politicians blamed cell phones for helping to mobilize a race riot in
Sydney in 2005, but what was ignored was the power of traditional media, including the fact that

4 In a longitudinal study of student writers at Stanford University—including both academic and
“real-world” writing via text, email, and other media—Andrea Lunsford found that despite
popular claims that students’ writing was getting worse because of texting and social networking,
these literate activities were actually helping them to develop a range of writing styles that helped
them to adapt to various audiences and situations (Lunsford, “Our Semi-Literate Youth?”)
these text messages were read aloud on the most popular and influential conservative talk-radio show in Sydney (124-125).

In many ways, cell phones have become a technology that particularly fits into girls’ social lives—a reversal in the history of digital technology trends. In a culture of gendered technology use, where computers have historically been understood as a more male-centered domain (see Gerrard 186-190), girls have taken up cell phones to communicate a much higher frequency than boys. Girls are more likely to own a cell phone than boys (“Teen Online” 51), and whereas teenage boys average just 30 sent and received texts a day, girls average sending and receiving 80 texts a day (Lenhart et al 3). While the majority of teens with cell phones text their friends every day, girls are more likely than boys to text multiple friends in a single day.

Anecdotal evidence from the Pew Research Center’s focus groups suggests that girls are also more likely to use emoticons and other expressive punctuation and language, whereas boys are less likely to use “indicators of tone in their (oftentimes brief) messages” (Lenhart et al 33). This shift in gendered affinity for a digital communication tool may be due, in part, to the anachronistic term “phone” applied to mobile devices and the carry over of gendered practices with landline phones to mobile phones, as women and girls have a much more pronounced history of social telephone use than boys and men (see, for example, Moyal’s study of gendered telephone use in Australia).

Not only do cell phones provide the opportunities to re-imagine gendered relations to digital technologies, but they also provide contexts for new practices related to romance and intimacy. As Goggin writes, mobile telephones “ushered in new protocols, genres, and practices for mediated communication for romance [. . .], opening up new opportunities for behaving and relating differently, and especially promising (or threatening) to be signally implicated in the dynamic contemporary redrawing of boundaries between public and private spheres” (127). One such boundary that is being redrawn is the one between private, intimate sharing of photos and
the “public” circulation of those images once one is forwarded one beyond the original, intended recipient. This is a primary concern of the moral panic over sexting: that teenagers will lose control of their private images as they circulate from cell phone to cell phone and even online.

**Teenagers’ and Young Adults’ Sexting Practices and Perceptions**

Teenagers have been taking sexually provocative or nude pictures of themselves since the development of the Polaroid camera (Bland; Silver). Because the Polaroid was an instant camera, it allowed for the quick development of film away from the surveillance of parents and film developers. For example, social media researcher Danah Boyd reports that as a teenager she took Polaroids of herself naked, mostly out of curiosity (“Teen Sexting”). To my knowledge, no studies exist about youth sharing analog sexually provocative pictures of themselves. Polaroids, however infrequent or frequent this sharing might have been, allowed for a clandestine activity that the affordances of digital media on mobile phones and computers make more difficult: It is, after all, much easier to hide a Polaroid in a bedroom than to hide a photo on a mobile phone when friends or parents might look through a phone. Yet it’s much more difficult to copy and distribute a Polaroid than it is to simply forward on an image through MMS.

In addition to the (rather brief and undocumented) history of teenagers taking provocative pictures of themselves or each other, telephones too have a history of being related to sexual expression and activity even before the advent of mobile phones. James E. Katz notes that the telephone enhanced users’ ability to search for romantic and sexual partners, including prostitutes, and enabled “an entirely de novo mode of [sexual] expression”: remote, disembodied interactive phone sex (124-125). Whether people were using the telephone to set up appointments with prostitutes, to call sex lines, or to have phone sex with romantic or sexual partners, the device allowed for new sexual relations that could be practiced from a distance. The convergences
on mobile phones discussed above serves to make these sexual practices more mobile, more image-based, and—because mobile phones are personalized, carried on the body and nearly everywhere—possibly more clandestine. But additionally, because of the recorded nature of these pictures and videos, and because of the ease in which they are forwarded on, they have the chance to circulate much more broadly and out of the control of the original sender and recipient.

In this section, I outline sexting practices and perceptions of teenagers and young adults, providing a meta-analysis based on five surveys conducted by various researcher organizations between 2009 and 2011. I discuss the kairotic nature of sexting—the temporal aspect of sending a sexual message, both in terms of the moment of sending and in terms considering long-term effects, and discuss the nonrational aspect of this type rhetorical action.

It’s hard to nail down exactly how ubiquitous sexting is for any age group, and reasons for sexting seem to vary greatly. While national surveys have been conducted of teenagers and young adults, a complete and accurate picture of sexting practices and their frequency is nearly impossible to paint. As of mid-2011, there have been at least five surveys about teenager and young adult sexting behavior, conducted by the Pew Research Center (Lenhart; Lenhart et al); Cox Communications in conjunction with Harris Interactive (“Teen Online”); the National Campaign to Prevent Teen & Unplanned Pregnancy in coordination with Cosmo Girl (“Sex and Tech”); the Associated Press with MTV (“A Thin Line”); and Rhode Island University researchers Sue K. Adams and Tiffani S. Kisler (“New Sexting Laws”).

As Table 4.1 shows, these surveys vary in the age demographics of their samples and in their definitions of sexting, in part leading to very different results for how many youth send

5 B. Elwood-Clayton writes of the possibilities of texting for young women and intimacy: “As texting is clandestine by nature, it enables secret dialogue away from parental eyes and provides a means of expression where young women do not have to adhere to traditional rules of gender conduct. Texting provides a site where young women can choose alternative strategies and experiment with romantic agency without the stigmatization that is often associated with sexual proactivity” (qtd. in Goggin 76).
sexts. For instance, the Associated Press and MTV survey defines sexting solely as participants sending “naked images of themselves” through cell phones (2). In contrast, the definition in “Sex and Tech” is broader, asking separate questions about pictures and messages, and including “personal texts, emails, IMs, etc.” (5). But even when we admit to sexting being a variously defined term, other terms are up to interpretation. Terms like “nearly nude” (Lenhart 3) and “sexually suggestive” (“Sex and Tech” 5), for example, are not as stable terms as “nude” is—they are up to interpretation. These terms are so dependent upon interpretation that teenagers have been threatened with child pornography charges for taking pictures of themselves in swimsuits or training bras at a slumber party. A district attorney in Pennsylvania was threatening teenage girls and boys with felony pornography charges after the high school administration confiscated phones and found about 100 photos. But some of these photos were probably fairly typical of any teenager with a smart phone: a photograph of two girls side-by-side in thick white training bras at a slumber party, one with a cell phone to her ear, the other flashing a peace sign with her fingers. To the parents, the girls were just being “goofballs,” but to the D.A., the picture was “provocative,” despite the fact that it appears the girls never even forwarded the picture. While some of the teenagers agreed to avoid court by going through a re-education program and probation, the parents of the girls in their training bras successfully sued the D.A. (Heflick; Wypijewski, “Through a Lens Snarkly”). Terms, then, are up to interpretation: Research participants could interpret “sexually suggestive” in a number of ways.
Table 4-1: Summary of Surveys of Teenagers’ and Young Adults’ Sexting Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Sexting Definition</th>
<th>Sent a Sext?</th>
<th>Received a Sext?</th>
<th>Forwarded a Sext?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pew (Lenhart; Lenhart et al)</td>
<td>800 total ages 12-17</td>
<td>“creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images” through cell phones (Lenhart 3)</td>
<td>4% of cell-owning teens; no difference in gender</td>
<td>15% of cell-owning teens</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCPTP &amp; Cosmo Girl (“Sex and Tech”)</td>
<td>1,280 total: 653 ages 13-19 627 ages 20-26</td>
<td>“Sexually suggestive pictures/video: semi-nude or nude personal pictures/video taken of oneself and not found on the Internet, or received from a stranger (like spam), etc.” (5)</td>
<td>“Sexually suggestive messages: sexually suggestive written personal texts, emails IMs, etc.—and not those you might receive from a stranger (like spam), etc.” (5)</td>
<td>20% of teenagers 22% of teen girls 18% of teen boys</td>
<td>31% of teenagers 14% of teenagers 33% of young adults 36% of young adult women 31% of young adult men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-1: Summary of Surveys of Teenagers’ and Young Adults’ Sexting Practices, cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Sexting Definition</th>
<th>Sent a Sext?</th>
<th>Received a Sext?</th>
<th>Forwarded a Sext?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cox &amp; Harris (“Teen Online”)</td>
<td>655 total ages 13-18</td>
<td>“sending sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos” (5)</td>
<td>9% of teens</td>
<td>17% of teens</td>
<td>3% of teens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6% of teen boys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12% of teen girls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP &amp; MTV (“A Thin Line”)</td>
<td>1,247 total ages 14 to 24</td>
<td>“naked image of themselves” (2)</td>
<td>1 in 10 shared a nude image of themselves</td>
<td>14% of males</td>
<td>17% of recipients reported passing images to someone else. 55% of those passed the image on to more than 1 person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13% of females</td>
<td>9% of females</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9% of males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“messages ‘with sexual words or images’ by text or on the internet” (2)</td>
<td>29% received</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams &amp; Kisler (“New Sexting Laws”)</td>
<td>204 college students at the University of Rhode Island</td>
<td>not available</td>
<td>Two-thirds reported sending a sexually suggestive message (78% of those were to a partner; 10% were sent without consent of the original sender)</td>
<td>56% received sexually suggestive images 78% received sexually suggestive messages</td>
<td>17% forwarded a sexually explicit message they received</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ambiguity of these surveys allows them to be appropriated for the goals of a moral panic. By creating arbitrary age ranges and flexible definitions of sexting, the surveys allow their data to be reported in ways that possibly inflate the frequency of sexting practices and make it appear more epidemic. Differing age brackets, particularly, allow for a picture that “teenagers” or “youth” are sexting more frequently. “Sex and Tech” lumps in 18- and 19-year-olds with younger teenagers, Cox’s poll includes legal 18-year-olds with teenagers (“Teen Online”), and MTV’s poll lumps all their participants together in a group ages 14 to 24 (“A Thin Line”). Who is surveyed matters little in the leads to news stories. *Wired* magazine could report on the MTV survey: “If you think the sexting phenomenon is growing, you’re not imagining it. According to a new survey, almost one-third of youths admit they’re engaged in sexting-related activities that involved either e-mailing a photo or a video of themselves in the nude or being the recipient of such images” (Zetter). Never mind that the statistic “one-third” comes from those who received images or messages through text or the Internet (“A Thin Line” 2)—the article can conflate full legal adults (up to 24-year-olds) with teenagers, as the article refers to “girls” and “boys,” but buries the age range deep in the article (“Zetter”). Even when nuance about age is provided, data can be used to incite fear: *Time* magazine’s online “Healthland” section reported on the Rhode Island survey of college students and had to incite fears about minors: “the issue of younger people sending explicit images and messages via cell-phone is increasingly worrying. There have been several high-profile cases recently in which a forwarded sext has made life misery for the original composer of the message. It has also left those forwarding the message facing child pornography charges” (Luscombe).

Thus, the only conclusion we might be able to draw about the ubiquity of sexting from this data is that sexting is more frequent among older teens and young adults than among younger teens, and that typically teenager girls are more likely to have sent a sexually suggestive photo than boys, and that boys are more likely to have received one than girls.
The information from these surveys become more interesting as we see the various different reasons that teens and young adults report sexting, though it becomes difficult to put this information in situational contexts. Researchers did not ask participants how often they sexted for particular purposes, but rather what reasons they had for sexting. “Sex and Tech” asked those who have sent or posted “suggestive messages or nude/semi-nude pictures/videos (of yourself)” their reasons, noting, “Please think about any/all of those you’ve ever sent/post and mark all that apply.” While each situation of sexting might be very different, a single time of sexting because one was “Pressured to send it” counts as much as twelve times of sending one “As a joke” in the survey—a methodological problem that is not noted by the researchers (12). I would also add that it can be difficult, in retrospect, to interpret and understand one’s reasons for any activity at the time, as we always reinterpret memories, perhaps many, many times, after the fact. Thus, while I draw on these data to develop a picture of sexting behaviors, I am more interested in laying out the various reasons that teens and young adults sext, rather than discussing frequency of reasons.

These various reasons that teens sext means that we may be looking at rhetorical actions that share a form but not necessarily a genre. Carolyn Miller, in her foundational essay on “Genre as Social Action,” distinguishes between forms and genres: Instead of understanding genres as form, we should understand them as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). For a genre, that is, what is typified is not necessarily the form, but the action in response to recurrent exigencies. For sexting practices, there are various different exigencies for sending a sexually suggestive text or a nude or sexually suggestive image or video. Thus, we might understand sexting as situated practices in response to a variety of exigencies constrained by the immediate kairotic moment of texting. Because texting can be so quick and immediate, assessing situations can be difficult. The kairos of the situation—that is, the situatedness of time and place—can be very short, as electronic communication like texting encourages a speedy response. But another aspect of kairos alters the rhetorical situation in digital environments: Because it is
much easier to forward texts and other digital messages to others, users need to consider not only the short term delivery of a message, but also the possible future distribution or circulation of the message.\(^6\) This means that the *kairotic* situatedness of considering sending a text with a sexual image is incredibly complex. A potential sender might need to ask him or herself: Who is the recipient? Are they trustworthy? Will this relationship continue? Will this person be trustworthy in a week? In a month? Do other people handle this recipient’s phone, making it more likely that someone else could see this image? Is a joke response, like a picture of something else, more appropriate in this situation? Do I include my face in this image? The questions could easily proliferate.

These questions can proliferate in part because sexting can serve multiple and various purposes. It seems that the majority of youth and young adults who send sexts send them to romantic partners (Lenhart 6; “Teen Online” 36; “Sex and Tech” 2; “A Thin Line” 2; “New Sexting Laws”). Some teenage couples sext in lieu of sexual activity, some as a prelude to sex, and some as part of being sexually active (Lenhart 6). In fact, sexting is described by some youth as a “safer alternative to real life sexual activity” (8). The next most frequent recipient of sexts is crushes or potential romantic or sexual partners; sexting seems to be a form of courtship or attention getting (Lenhart 7; “Teen Online” 33; “Sex and Tech” 2; “A Thin Line 2). Reasons that teenagers and young adults give for sexting are varied, but include because someone requested it, to just have fun, to impress someone as a potential dating partner, and to feel good about themselves (“Teen Online” 37). “Sex and Tech” explains that nearly half of sexters reported that they send sexts in response to sexually suggestive content they received. This does not necessarily mean they were pressured: Only a quarter of all the teenagers in their survey (whether

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\(^6\) In his case study of an activist who engaged in multiple types of rhetorical action in order to share drafts and deliver an anti-oppression manifesto, Jim Ridolfo makes the distinction between delivery, or the sending of a text to particular audiences; distribution, or how third parties help in broading the audience of a text (like listservs and publishing); and circulation, or the “out there” when texts start appearing in “unexpected places” (125-127).
they sexted or not) reported feeling pressure to send such content. In fact, only 12% of teenage girls who sexted said they felt pressure to sext. Among actual sexters, about two-thirds claimed they did so to be “fun and flirtatious”; other reasons given were that the sext was seen as a “joke” or a way to “feel sexy” (4).

Considering whether to send someone a sexual image, then, could take place in various different contexts, involve a wide range of reasons, and take into account a variety of different risks. As I discuss in the next section, much of the pedagogy around sexting encourages teenagers to just not sext, to avoid the risk of someone forwarding them on or of getting in trouble with the law. One problem with such a risk-analysis take for sexting is that it promotes a cost-benefit rational approach to decision-making, one that fails to take into account the desires of sexters: to be liked, to get attention, to develop deeper or different sexual bonds with others, even to make others laugh (or perhaps even be disgusted) from receiving a surprise sext. These decisions, constrained and made possible in the kairotic moment of deciding to send a sext should be understood as nonrational instead of a rational cost-benefit risk analysis. As Tim Dean explains in his analysis of barebacking sex, rational risk-assessment doesn’t explain risky behavior because such a view fails to take into account fantasies and desires (Unlimited Intimacy 31). Instead, “sexual conduct is permeated by the nonrational.” It is important to note that this does not mean that decisions or actions are irrational. Psychoanalysis distinguishes between the irrational, which is tainted as pathological, and nonrational, that which can be understood as motivated or animated by fantasy and desire (32). Dean’s discussion of barebacking culture helps to explain this: A risk analysis would weigh the risks of contracting HIV against the sexual benefits of unprotected sex. But barebacking is animated by various fantasies and the desire for certain types of intimacy.

Just like barebackers know there is a risk to unprotected sex, most teenagers know there is a risk involved in sexting as well: the possibility that an image will get forwarded on, or that an
authority figure will find it. Despite popular narratives that teenagers are unaware of the risks of sexting, many teenagers seem to know that there are risks involved in sexting. A good portion of them knows that sexually explicit texts and images do get forwarded on. “Sex and Tech” reports that that somewhere between a third and a half of teenagers and young adults are aware of this, and that a similar number have had such images forwarded to them (3). I imagine that now, a few years later with more mediated discussion of sexting and its entry into popular vernacular, even more texters are aware of these risk. Even those teenagers to who do sext understand that it is “dangerous”; in fact, only a slightly smaller portion of youth who sext think that their online information is unsafe as compared to those who do not sext (“Teen Online” 12, 33).

Perceptions of sexting and actual practices seem to differ quite a bit. Whereas only a quarter of teenagers in the “Sex and Tech” survey report that they have felt pressure to sext, popular opinion about sexting believes that pressure from someone else is a primary motivator of sexting. For instance, “Sex and Tech” asked participants why they thought others sexted: Nearly half of female participants claimed that pressure from a boy is the primary reason for sending sexually explicit material (4). Certainly, pressure exists: The MTV poll reports that 61% of those who have sent a naked photo of themselves felt pressured to do so from someone at least once, but it’s unclear whether that pressure led to a sexting situation, or how often pressure was involved in sexting (“A Thin Line” 2).

According to these surveys, teenagers’ overall attitudes toward sexting vary and seem to rely on three factors: perceptions of age-appropriateness, discourses of shame, and concern about consequences. The majority of them seem to believe that “people their age are too young to be sexting” (seven in ten in the Cox survey), but many of them also believe that they are old enough to be capable of deciding for themselves if it is right for them to sext (“Teen Online” 10). Teenagers describe sexting in a variety of ways, whether positive (“hot,” “trusting,” “flirty,” “exciting”) or negative (“stupid,” “slutty,” “uncomfortable”), and according to the AP and MTV
survey, girls are more likely than boys to describe sexting negatively (“A Thin Line” 3). Sexual shaming is central in decisions not to sext. In a focus group follow-up to their survey, the Pew Research Center found participants who explained they don’t sext because “This is common only for girls with ‘slut’ reputations” (Lenhart 9). Perceptions of sexting that rely on narratives of sexually active teenager girls as slutty influence perceptions of sexting. Some recipients welcome sexual images, while others think it’s “over the line” and “completely uncalled for,” in the words of one study participant (Lenhart 7). And of course, consequences influence behavior and perceptions of sexting. One participant in the Pew study explains, “I have never seen or received a picture because I do know that it is illegal. [. . .] I think texting [sexually suggestive images] is too risky—a friend could take your phone and see it. That’s not something you want to be in public. And at my school you can get in trouble for it” (9).

Getting “caught” seems to be an important aspect of the dangers of sexting for teens, since this is, of course, the real danger behind sexting, leading to parental punishment, bullying from peers, or potential problems with the law. However, while parents often think they are monitoring or aware of their children’s cell phone and online behaviors, many teenagers claim that their parents know little or nothing about what they do online (“Teen Online” 56). Monitoring a teenager’s cell phone by looking at the contents doesn’t seem to decrease the likelihood that a teenager will sext, or even generally “impact patterns of cell phone use by teens,” according to the Pew study (Lenhart et al 3; Lenhart 3). Very few sexters get caught: Only 14% of sexters in the Cox study had ever been caught, and they were typically caught by a parent, not by friends or school authorities (“Teen Online” 39).
A Moral Panic: The Rhetoric of Risk in *The Dangers of Sexting and Sexting in America*

As I discussed above, these surveys are incomplete, though useful, pictures of teenagers’ and young adults’ behaviors and attitudes toward sexting. They have been helpful, however, in helping to marshal forward a moral panic around sexting, including being cited in the two pedagogical films I discuss here. By turning to these films, Human Relation Media’s *The Dangers of Sexting* and MTV’s *Sexting in America*, I want to explore the implications of the public pedagogy around sexting for shaming, agency, and ethics for teenager mobile phone use. I argue that while these videos might appear helpful in many ways for teenagers to understand the risks of sexting, they rely on an individualistic ethics of risk-aversion rather than an ethics of concern toward others. The ethical framework of these videos particularly disadvantages young girls and women, as their approach fails to address sexual shame and sexism. Through a rhetoric of risk that presents ethics in limited ways, these films and their accompanying pedagogical resources fail to address underlying social problems, fail to take into account potentially valid, nonrational and intimate reasons for sexting, and fail to provide many solutions beyond a “just say no” rhetoric that ultimately privatizes solutions and fails to help students navigate and understand their rhetorical contexts in ways that might promote healthier, more critical understandings of their (sexual and political) technology use and relationships with others.

*The Dangers of Sexting* is one of many videos produced and distributed by Human Relations Media, a company that specializes in educational videos for K-12 classrooms in a variety of subject areas, including language arts, sciences, health education, drug education—and, with the production of *Dangers of Sexting* and their video on cell phones, *B Careful When U Txt: The Dangers of Texting and Sexting*—digital education. *The Dangers of Sexting* is a 17-minute DVD that introduces and defines sexting, overviews the reasons and consequences for sexting, and offers teenager viewers suggestions about what they can do about sexting. It is accompanied...
by a “Teacher’s Resource Book” that includes discussion questions, classroom activities, and a pre- and post-test.

The film works through a montage of testimonials from teenagers, stitched together by two young adult hosts and supplemented by information from Dr. Elizabeth Schroeder, Executive Director of Answer, a sexuality education organization at Rutgers. The video is framed as a cause-consequence-action sequence. First, the video overviews the causes of sexting, or the reasons teens send sexual images of themselves or others: for humor, because guys “get a joke out of it”; to keep a boyfriend’s interest; because of peer pressure; or out of revenge. The reason of “revenge” serves as a transition into the consequences of sexting: feelings of betrayal; being bullied; harmed reputation (because the images are permanent and easily circulated), which could “tarnish you”; and trouble with the law, including being prosecuted as a sex offender. Importantly, in most states, sexting can warrant a charge for the creation, ownership, or distribution of child pornography, which if convicted, can result in being placed on sex offender lists for decades or even a lifetime. Next, the hosts and interviewed teenagers offer advice on how to avoid sexting if viewers are tempted or pressured into sending a sexual image of themselves, or if they receive one. Their advice includes refusing to send or ask for such messages; calmly asking the recipient to delete the message, without making a big deal of it, if you have sent one; talking to trusted adults if you’ve sent one or are receiving pressure to send one; and deleting an image right away if you’ve received it, and telling the sender you don’t want to receive them. Ultimately, though, the major advice is to simply never send one.

Importantly, the teenagers in the film provide testimonials in the form of “wake up calls”—conversion narratives that stigmatize sexting and frames non-sexters or reformed sexters as now “clean.” Many of the teenagers in the film, both boys and girls, had previously engaged in sexting but now see the errors of their ways. Autumn, for instance, was pressured by her boyfriend to send a sexual image of herself; he then forwarded this text to his friends, and the
result was her being shamed and bullied in school. Ben is another teenager who engaged in sexting: He received and forwarded a picture and was almost charged as a sex offender. Their rhetoric, as presented in the video, frames their decisions as poor ones that dirtied their reputations, and their conversions are presented as a cleansing. Autumn had been “tarnished” by the text, and charges against Ben were dropped only after “he stayed clean for a number of months.” Another young man attests to the shame around such behavior: sexting is “sleazy and pathetic.” The film engages in a similar logic that motivates the very bullying the film seeks to prevent: Mediated teen sexual activity is a shameful behavior that needs to be stigmatized.

* Sexting in America: When Privates Go Public * first aired in February 2010 on MTV and is available online. At roughly 20 minutes long, it shares the stories of Ally, a New Jersey teenager who sent her ex-boyfriend a picture that he forwarded on, resulting in extreme shaming and bullying at her school, and Phillip Alpert, who at 18 years old, got angry with his girlfriend and forwarded a sext from her to his contact list. Alpert wound up getting arrested, put on five years of probation, and registered on the sex offender list in Florida, which means that he can’t live too close to a school, playground, or church; cannot go to the college he wanted to; struggles to get a job; and goes to a weekly sex offender class. The film explores what the host calls a “thin line between private flirtation and public humiliation” by exploring the consequences of Ally’s and Phillip’s decisions, showing how leaked images harmed Rihanna and Fall Out Boy bassist Pete Wentz, and drawing on expert advice from figures such as Ann Shocket, editor-in-chief of * Seventeen; * Internet privacy and security lawyer Parry Atfab; and Richard Guerry from the Institute for Responsible Online and Cell Phone Communication.

Similarly to * The Dangers of Sexting *, MTV’s video attempts to show the repercussions of sexting: shame, humiliation, bullying, harmed reputation, and legal problems that can last for years. The film plays on the vulnerability of youth being “plugged in,” a situation that Socket describes as being “backed into a situation where they [teens] feel pressured to take a naked
picture.” The reasons for sexting are provided in a less structured way than HRM’s film, mostly through interviews with various teenagers, but remain similar: needing to feel wanted, being manipulated, and having fun or being a joke. But the repercussions are more severe: in the case of legal trouble, “scars that can affect somebody throughout their lifetime.” Additionally, sexting is presented as “inappropriate,” “never the best idea,” and “dangerous.”

One feature of Sexting in America that distinguishes it from The Dangers of Sexting is that the film takes more seriously how sexting can function as a form of flirtation. The movie includes advice from the authors of Flirtexting, a book about how to flirt via text messages. They recommend the motto “less is more,” suggesting that if someone asks you to send a sex photo—“which you’re not going to do,” they make clear—then you can send a photo of your elbow or take a picture of a Victoria’s Secret Catalogue.

I find this attempt to take more seriously a reason for sexting that allows for playfulness and agency for teenage girls refreshing in comparison to The Dangers of Sexting’s more black-and-white stance of just avoiding sexting. However, both of these films don’t fully address desires to sext. What if teenagers actually want to sext and aren’t being “manipulated” into it. Desires for intimacy through digital images seems like an impossibility. MTV stresses that manipulation (of girls by boys) is at the root of sexting. Ally sent an image of herself because she wanted to get back together with her ex-boyfriend, but he was clearly dishonest and forwarded it on. And viewers are not given the reason Phillip already had an image of his girlfriend on his phone, so they are left to fill in the story on their own, or just leave the reasons unquestioned and follow the narrative offered by the film: Girls who send sexts are often manipulated by boyfriends or boys they are interested in.

The goal of The Dangers of Sexting is to “empower young people with information designed to help them avoid this risky behavior.” Because, according to the teacher’s guide, teenagers aren’t aware of the risks of sexting and don’t understand that digital messages don’t go
away, the film seeks to help teens avoid sexting altogether. But this rhetoric of risk and safety avoids very real, nonrational reasons that teens might engage in sexting. Certainly, both films acknowledges reasons such as peer pressure, but neither fully explores reasons related to intimacy. A question in the pre- and post-test to The Dangers of Sexting asks:

Which of the following is NOT a primary motivation for sexting?

a) revenge
b) pressure from a boyfriend or girlfriend
c) bonding
d) status (Simpson and Gaines 13)

My readers can probably guess at this point that the “correct” answer, according to the Teacher’s Resource Guide, is “bonding.”

These films ignore some possible nonrational reasons for sexting—and, when they call attention to these reasons, as this test question does, the possibility of those reasons are denied. Why couldn’t two teenagers sext in order to bond, to enrich their relationships through mobile devices? Certainly, adults do this. Why couldn’t a teenager? In her study of technical communication and the rhetoric of risk, Beverly Sauer shows how “expert models” privilege rational decision-making over actual practices, which often have little possibility for documentations and are often nonrational in nature (15-160). She explores “critical moments of transformation,” when information moves from one medium, document, or setting to another, such as when testimony is captured in writing, or when information is re-represented from one account to another (75-76). While such moments of transformation are necessary, certain experiences, knowledges, and ways of knowing are lost or changed in each transformation (84).

Though Sauer is analyzing technical communication in the mining industry, the rhetoric of risk works similarly in these two films: The testimonials of youth are framed and presented in such a way that certain experiences, knowledges, and ways of knowing are ignored or made
invisible in order to focus viewers on the need to just avoid sexting. Certainly, sexting is a risky behavior that does warrant caution, but by ignoring any real, valid nonrational motivations and presenting sexting as something “inappropriate,” “sleazy,” and so forth, the video makes it difficult to imagine what a decision-making process might look like for a teenager who might actually want to engage in sexting. Ultimately, as I explain below, what is at stake in these videos, as well as the larger moral panic, is who or what is presented as having certain types of agencies.

**Blame and Agency: Who Is Responsible for Lost Privacy?**

As many scholars have explained, moral panics are moments when some aspect of society is identified as a threat to the social order, and a scapegoat is identified and targeted with a call to action to make society “safe” again. Often, though, the real causes of social problems are left unaddressed (Thompson 3). Teens, technologies, and sexualities are often the targets of moral panics, and here we see the three converge as the scapegoats of a moral panic over sexting, with worrying consequences for agency and ethics in relation to sexuality, sexism, a culture of shame, and cell phone usage.

As I will explain, the rhetoric of this moral panic has harmful implications: The real problem isn’t a teenager sending a sexually provocative or nude picture to someone else. The real problems are the expectations by teenage boys that girls send these images, the forwarding of those images on, and the resulting bullying—all influenced by a culture of sexism and shame. Young girls are taught to protect themselves, but young boys (and girls as well) are not taught about their position in a sexual and technological ecology of shame and expected access to girls’ bodies. In the cover story to the *Reader’s Digest* issue I discussed at the opening of this chapter, Judith Newman approaches sexting through the frame of finding her seven-year-old son Henry
looking at pornography on her iPhone. She advocates that parents talk to their children about sexting, but the pedagogy she proposes is noticeably non-gendered. She writes: “the next time an image from one of these sites pops up on my iPhone, Henry and I will have another talk, as age-appropriate as I can make it, about people’s bodies and how his body belongs to him and him alone. Once he takes off his clothes online, even as a joke, he becomes public property. Other people have control over him” (Newman). Newman seems to ignore, and thus help her readers ignore, that the problem isn’t boys’ perceptions of their own bodies, but rather our conceptions of girls’ bodies. In cases of sexting that make the news, never has a boy’s body been the image forwarded on to others and the cause of a spectacle leading to school bullying, shaming, and harassment. This isn’t to say this doesn’t happen, but rather that the issue isn’t respecting one’s own body: It’s respecting others’ privacy and bodies.

While these films hope to “empower young people,” the rhetoric akin to the Reagans’ “Just Say No” rhetoric too quickly and easily places agency in the wrong places. First, this rhetoric privatizes solutions, making the solution a matter of individual moral character rather than any sort of collective or public action. The only moral action necessary in this moral panic is to call for youth to see the dangers of sexting and avoid this behavior. But causes of problems, like the extreme shaming and bullying in schools, is left unaddressed. Susan Mackey-Kallis and Dan F. Hahn’s analysis of the Reagans’ “Just Say No” drug campaign shows how this rhetoric of negativity results in a privatized responsibility that requires denying the flesh and makes public action seem ineffective (2, 13). The rhetoric in these videos, while not explicitly echoing “Just Say No,” works similarly to the anti-drug education and abstinence-only education, making the individual the locus of responsibility, and thus reinforcing that the individual is also to blame for
poor decisions. Any sort of public or collective action seems ineffective or not necessary, because individuals should just not sext.\footnote{A similar rhetoric is at work when it comes to blaming “sluts” for being raped: A collective discussion and action about a rape culture is unnecessary if only women would dress appropriately. The privatization of responsibility onto the victim reinforces that these are individual women’s poor decisions, not a larger social problem of men believing they have a right of access to women’s bodies and sex.}

The films’ conception of agency for teenagers is thus limited and doesn’t explore much possibility for nonrational decision making that might be healthy and productive for youth’s sexual relations with others and with technologies. The suggestions from the Flirtexting authors are certainly a step, but the exploration falls short. Agency throughout these two films are located in four places: 1) boys who pressure girls for sexual images for prurient pleasures, childish jokes, or for revenge; 2) bullying peers, who either forward sexts in order to shame girls or who shame girls for their perceived sexual promiscuity at school or online; 3) girls who have the choice to either avoid sexting or be “part of the problem,” in the words of lawyer Parry Aftab in Sexting in America; and 4) the digital “out there”—a phrase that is repeated in The Dangers of Sexting but never fully explored (I discuss this last point in a later section of this chapter). There is no room in these films for the agency of sexual beings who might choose to sext, making this agency difficult to imagine. In fact, the assumption in both of these films is that teenagers wouldn’t or shouldn’t want to sext to begin with. MTV’s website for sexting resources suggests that teens “Resist pressure:” “Why sext if you don’t want to?” (“Sexting: What Is It?”).

These two videos, and the larger moral panic around sexting, fail to address real concerns about sexism, shame, and morality. Isn’t the real problem here not that youth are sexting, but that boys have a perceived right to access girls’ bodies (and images of their bodies), and that our culture shames sexual girls, relying on and reinforcing a binary of purity and promiscuity? The locations of agency portrayed in these films are particularly troubling: Young men are manipulative, and teenagers bully. Both of these are naturalized as just part of youth culture and
never questioned. It is not as though discussions of gendered differences are absent from the films: in *The Dangers of Sexting*, Dr. Schroeder briefly critiques our “culture that really pushes boys to be assertive” and notes that boys who receive sexts get positive attention and “benefits from breaking the rules,” whereas girls who send sexts are seen as “negative, morally reprehensible, promiscuous.” Dylan, a young man in the film, even notes how boys are more protective of their privacy and identity, generally not including their faces in sexts, whereas girls generally include their faces. But while some of the information is presented that could lead toward a discussion of the gendered power differentials around sex, morality, and privacy, the film quickly moves on: Girls need to protect their privacy, not question, critique, or act upon gendered power relations. These films make protection a top priority, rather than any sort of questioning of the social order that makes sexual shame, expected access to girls’ bodies, and sexism the norm.

The rhetoric of risk aversion in this moral panic, then, serves to support a culture of sexism and shame. The desires of boys and men who ask for and expect images of girls are left unaddressed, and bullying is naturalized as a response to girls who have chosen to risk harm to their own reputation. Individuals who chose to send sexual images of themselves are to blame for their own loss of privacy, rather than those who forward on those images or those who engage in shaming behavior once those images are received. This disproportionate punishment can be seen in how sexting has been handled by legal authorities.

**Sexting and Disproportionate Punishment**

Another key aspect of this moral panic is the legal repercussions of sexting, which disproportionately punish those who have not harmed anyone compared to those who have. Many instances exist where teenagers who have created images of themselves and sent it to one person,
or where teenagers have received an image unsolicited, are punished just as much as teenagers who forward images to others. While laws in some states are changing, to either decriminalize teenage sexting if it’s between minors, or to change the status of the crime from a felony to a misdemeanor, typically the punishments for sexting can have massive consequences, including being put on sex offender lists in some states. Gayle Rubin explains that one of the ways that sex and sexuality are politicized and policed in our culture is throughout hierarchies of sex that punish sex acts perceived as deviant or not as valuable (279). Sexual acts that are not “charmed”—monogamous, heterosexual sex between adult couples that involve only bodies (no manufactured objects) and is in the privacy of a bedroom—are often subject to punishment that is disproportionate to other social issues and overly harsh (281, 288). One component of this legal policing is age of consent laws, which can be “especially ferocious in maintaining the boundary between childhood ‘innocence’ and ‘adult’ sexuality” (290). And even though laws that regulate sex and sexuality are not always strictly enforced, those who break the laws “remain vulnerable to the possibility of arbitrary arrest” (291).8

For many who are prosecuted or face prosecution, sexting is the new victimless crime. Teenagers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Wisconsin, New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey have been investigated for, charged with, or prosecuted for the creation, ownership, or

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8 Rubin’s analysis also extends to other extra-legal social structures that attempt to control non-valued sex and sexuality. As the use of technologies qualifies sex as impure, it’s worth noting how technological sexual behavior is still policed, even among adults. JoAnn Wypijewski makes this observation about the 2011 Anthony Weiner scandal when Representative Weiner posted a picture of his erect penis on the photo service yfrog.com and linked to it from his Twitter account in a message to a 21-year-old college student in Seattle, whom he had never met. Weiner was forced to resign from Congress after the media attention to the scandal (see “Anthony Weiner Sexting Scandal” on Wikipedia for a more full account). Wypijewski observes that had this been a physical encounter with a woman, it might not have been so shocking: “Had Weiner been caught in a hotel room on top of, say, Lisa, amid their mutual cries of ‘big cock’ and ‘tight pussy’ and had there been a black book with other women’s names on the bedside table, the press would have had a good time with the story, but no one would call Weiner a pervert; he’d be a stud. As it is, what made the sex here safe, its noncarnality—no contact, no fluids, no baby, no payment, no strings—now makes it sick. The usual social controls aren’t operative” (“Weiner in a Box”).
distribution of child pornography using cell phones or the Internet (Rommelmann; G. Stone; Lithwick; Lewin). Even youth who receive unsolicited naked images and never forwarded them to anyone else have been charged, as in the case of sixteen-year-old Alex Davis who received images from his girlfriend and found himself charged in New York after a friend of his found the images on his computer and forwarded them on (Rommelmann). And, I discussed above, it is often up to a district attorney or judge to define terms, meaning that youth have been investigated or charged for such innocuous pictures as them in bathing suits.

Punishments for convictions for child pornography can be harsh, including being put on a sex offender list for decades in some states. And the irony of punishing consensual acts as the production of child pornography in order to protect teenagers seems lost on attorneys and judges. In a case in Florida in 2007, two teenagers were convicted for creating child pornography, a picture of them engaging in an “unspecified sex act” that was never distributed. They appealed, but the state appeals court upheld the conviction, explaining that there was a “reasonable expectation that the material will ultimately be disseminated.” If the material had been disseminated, the judges explained apparently without any sense of irony, “future damage may be done to these minors’ careers or personalities” (Rommelman). But while the predicted future damage didn’t happen, certainly a court conviction for child pornography has even more likelihood for future damages to reputation and careers.

Luckily, some laws are changing, but while the punishments may not be as severe in some cases, they often still punish the creator of an image as much as those who forward an image on without consent. Between 2009 and 2011, 14 states enacted laws that addressed minors sexting, and in 2011, 21 other states have had bills related to sexting introduced in their legislatures (Fernández 113). A change in Nebraska law, for example, made it legal for teenagers under 18 to send images to teenagers who are least 15, as long as they are not forwarded images (Lewin). But even revised legal practices can be detrimental, as in the case of Ohio teenager
“Taylor,” who through “sheer geographic luck” was eligible for a “sexting diversion program for minors.” After she was coerced into sending a video of her stripping to a classmate, and he forwarded it on, she was threatened with being charged as “a tier 2 sex offender.” Because Montgomery County, Ohio, has an education program for teenagers who are caught sexting, Taylor was able enroll in the program rather than be prosecuted as a child pornographer.

However, even this program doesn’t seem ideal, as the kids who forwarded Taylor’s video were also enrolled in the same program, thus, receiving the same punishment (Fernández 113-114). And in the Pennsylvania cases I discussed earlier, one girl who went through a re-education program rather than go to trial was forced to write a report discussing “Why it was wrong” to pose for the picture, answering questions like “How did [the action] affect the victim? The school? The community?” In this report, she had to discuss “what it means to be a girl in today’s society.” This particular girl, by the way, was wearing a swimming suit in the picture that the district attorney found so “provocative” (Wypijewski, “Through a Lens Starkly”). Thus, even in some states and counties where options exist other than legal convictions, the punishment for someone who has been the victim of having her images forwarded on can receive the same punishment as those who violated her privacy. And charges and punishments are largely up to the interpretations and decisions of prosecutors, investigators, and judges.9

The Digital “Out There”: When Privates Go Where?

Thus far, I have argued about various aspects of the moral panic around sexting, including how the rhetoric of risk places blame on those who send a sext rather than on those who forward them,

9 Scholarship on the law and sexting is growing and developing, and for the sake of space I have largely left it unaddressed. For other discussions of the sociopolitical dynamics and legal and ethical implications of current legal practices and sexting, including potential solutions, see Sacco et al.; Sweeny; Levick and Moon; Ryan; Mujahid; Shafron-Perez; Szymialis; Fichtenberg; Sullivan.
how the moral panic fails to address sexism and a culture of shame, and how legal punishments
disproportionately punish those who take naked or “sexual” pictures of themselves. Earlier I
noted how the two pedagogical videos I analyze posit four types of agents: boys who pressure
girls for sexual images, peers who forward sexts and bully, girls who should choose not to sext,
and a digital “out there,” leaving this last one unexplored.

Both The Dangers of Sexting and Sexting in America place agency in a digital “out there”
that serves to mystify how information moves in digital environments. Beyond specific examples
in the videos in which viewers learn that individuals have forwarded on sexts, the general
takeaway from these two films is that information and images seems to simply move on their
own. There is, according to Sexting in America, a “thin line” between private and public, but what
exactly is that line and how does an image become “public”? How many people, devices, or
screens constitute “public”? In the same video, Richard Guerry explains that if an image gets onto
the Internet (somehow?), the images may be stolen and sold on a “digital black market.” He
explains that if “you put anything on that cell phone that you wouldn’t be okay with every single
person in the world seeing, then you’re using digital technology irresponsibly. And what is going
to happen to your picture? That’s unknown.” These videos are fuzzy about how images actually
move, where they’re located, and how they are circulated. MTV’s resource website for sexting
and digital bullying continues this mystifying rhetoric, as it explains that images manage to
“escape.” The site describes one possible consequence of sexting: “You get a reputation—
because that ‘private’ sext somehow escaped the phone it was sent to.” Other places on the same
page continue this rhetoric of “escape”: “wham! They’re everywhere. And once they escape, it’s
almost impossible to get them back” (“Sexting: What Is It?”)

These two videos are not alone in using a mystifying rhetoric for digital environments
and the circulation of images. News articles explain that an image “spreads like wildfire” online
(G. Stone) and that “young people fail to appreciate that their naked pictures want to roam free”
(Lithwick). Time and again, these news stories explain that youth do not understand the implications of how easy it is for information to spread from cell phone to cell phone, but it seems as though beyond pointing at a few examples of teenage boys and girls who have forwarded on sexual images, these media stories and videos also can’t explain how information and images circulate in digital environments. Digital images are granted a sort of agency of their own, “escaping” from a recipient’s cell phone and in a “wham!” moment, spreading like wildfire online, roaming free.

I’m not opposed to granting objects or environments certain senses of agency, but this rhetoric serves to mask the real human perpetrators who forward sexual images. For an image to get online from a cell phone, it has to be posted there. Images do not just “escape”: They are forwarded on by real human agents. Rather than discuss the real human agents who forward images without the consent of the original sender, the moral panic grants the digital its own agency, making it mystical and not fully understood—something to be afraid of, and something that automatically becomes “public.”

**Conclusion**

What does it mean to be a girl in today’s society? The answer to this question is quite outside the scope of this project, but clearly a component of that is to take the blame for being sexual—or even being perceived as sexual—and for sending an image that others choose to forward on. Girls, then, are guilty for being victims. To be a girl in today’s digital age means avoiding risks online and taking the blame for such risks when others’ actions violate her privacy, leading to publicity.

In chapter one, I discussed the briefly available iPhone app Girls Around Me and *Cult of Mac* blogger John Browlee’s claim that this app signaled a “wake-up call about privacy.” Blogger
Marie Connelly responded to Brownlee and the media attention to Girls Around Me, explaining that her choices to chronicle her locations through Foursquare and have a public Facebook profile weren’t decisions made “out of ignorance, apathy, or laziness,” as Brownlee claimed. She critiques the rhetoric of risk and blame that informs Brownlee’s post and much of the other rhetoric about women and privacy, nothing that “I don’t think this is really a conversation about internet privacy as much as it’s a conversation about whether it’s safe to be a woman and live in public” (Connelly). Here again, in the discourses about sexting, we see a rhetoric of risk and blame that question not a culture of sexism and shame, but the decisions of young women to make themselves vulnerable.

“Wake-up calls” are a frequent motif when people discuss supposedly new, shocking behavior. We are supposed to “wake up” to the new realities of privacy or the new realities of teenagers’ technology use and sexual activities. But the real “wake up” call might be for our culture’s sexism and standards for women and young girls. Feminist blogger Cara Kulwicki, who is a contributor and editor of the popular blog Feministe, writes on her own blog the Curvature that mass media, commentators, and the law are treating those who forward images as the same as those who take a picture of themselves. She explains, “the problem is that the pictures are being treated as the problem.” Kulwicki’s point is that sending images of yourself, as long as it’s done willingly, is not morally wrong and should not be illegal, even if you’re a minor. This isn’t a “wake-up call” about teenager sexuality; “it should be a wake-up call to parents that their sons (and daughters—but primarily sons) may also engage in non-consensual sexual behavior and that they need to do something to stop it.”

The public pedagogy of digitally mediated intimacy places the blame for risky behavior disproportionately on girls instead of on those who violate others’ privacy. When directed toward parents, this pedagogy teaches them that conversations about protecting oneself, surveillance, and control are the solutions, rather than conversations about respecting others, shame, and others’
rights to inviolability. The solution in some articles is *monitor, monitor, monitor*. In an *Arizona Republic* article, the director of student-support services at a school district recommends monitoring cell phone behavior, including regularly checking messages and even getting a service from phone carries so that they are emailed each time their child sends or receives a text message (Bland). A *Wired* magazine article advocates using services that allow for monitoring or limiting texting and images services, such as a Verizon feature that allows parents to control whom their children can receive texts from and send them to, and SMobile’s Parental Control Dashboard, which allows parents to use their website to view any emails, messages, and pictures their children send or receive, as well as track them through GPS and filter their children’s calls (Silver).

*The Nation* writer JoAnn Wypijewski, in a brilliantly sharp column titled “Through a Lens Starkly,” calls attention to the sexist, prurient society that informs discourses and legal practices around sexting. Noting that many youth who are caught sexting are caught because school administrators confiscate phones and discover images, she imagines the administrators’ need “to snoop” in prose so lively it warrants quoting at length:

One can picture their fevered actions, fumbling with the student’s phone, opening one folder, then another, maddened as they press the wrong buttons and must begin again, without the nimbleness of youth—curses!—their otherwise desiccated imaginations now fertile with anticipated indecency; scouring through the teen’s pictures and messages, expectant that their suspicion will be confirmed, certain that all they want is to protect the children…And yet, there they are, instant oglers, prying into places not meant for them, gazing at images not made for them, drenching the relationship between school authority and student in sex.
Wypijewski argues that the moral panic around sexting has focused on “the traps of technology” and teenage stupidity, presuming youth practices to be “self-exploitation,” but has not focused on the “prurient reflex of grown-ups who spy on and punish” kids. Drawing on Amy Adler’s 2001 *Columbia Law Review* article “The Perverse Law of Child Pornography,” Wypijewski condemns investigators and attorneys for seeing pornography everywhere: We are taught “to think like a pedophile, to read the lascivious, the sexually provocative, the exploitative potential into almost any image.”\(^\text{10}\) Wypijewski then speculates, “it is just possible that the 15-year-olds are envisioning, however inchoately, a saner world than the one the grown-ups lecturing them have constructed, one where their life choices won’t be ruined by a ‘compromising’ photograph on the Internet. If sexting really is as common as it is claimed it’s more likely to proliferate than to abate, and then the issue won’t be scandal or embarrassment but banality.”

It is possible that, as Wypijewski claims, young people are imagining new intimacies and privacy practices that allow for the mediated sharing of images and the risk of making one’s body vulnerable to others. But even if some are, it seems that, based on the strong shaming behavior of teenagers when these images are spread through schools, that many more teenagers are thinking just like their parents: A young girl’s sexuality, when made visible, is something to shame.

We often think of new technologies as heralding new mentalities and drastically changing behaviors and the ways we think. Moral panics turn their attention to these new technologies, worrying that new technologies like mobile phones are changing behaviors. While they do afford new practices, often the responses to those technologies say more about a culture both before and after the introduction of the new technology. In this case, as I have shown, mobile technologies

\(^{10}\) In her analysis of the development of child pornography laws, Adler writes: “Child pornography law has a self-generating quality. As everything becomes child pornography in the eyes of the law—clothed children, coy children, children in settings were children are found—perhaps everything really does become pornographic” (264). Child pornography law not only describes pornography, but creates images of children as sexual: “Child pornography law becomes a vast realm of discourse in which the image of the child as sexual is not only preserved but multiplied” (265), so that “we saturate children with sexuality” (272).
might be changing teenagers’ sexual practices because of the ease of sharing photos, but one thing has remained the same: In our public imagination, it is incumbent upon girls and women to protect their own privacy, as we have not yet finished the work of granting girls and women the privacy and inviolability afforded to boys and men. As Nancy Welch explains, “Bound up with privacy are stories of benefit and protection and simultaneously stories of exclusion and denial” (“Ain’t” 28). One way that popular discourses and practices of privacy continue to exclude and deny is that women and girls are systematically denied the same rights to privacy granted to men.
In November 2008, 19-year-old Floridian Abraham Biggs committed suicide by overdosing on antidepressants in front of a live audience on Justin.tv, a site developed just the year before that allows users to broadcast live video online to an unlimited number of followers. While the publicity of his suicide was shocking enough, viewers of the footage and commenters on a forum where he had posted his plans egged him on, encouraging him to take his life, and the laughter and amusement in the chat client next to the video continued after he took the drug cocktail. The “joking and trash talking” continued even after it appeared Biggs stopped breathing up until the police—who had been notified by other users—arrived and covered up the webcam. As the police entered, 181 people were still watching the video, some of them leaving comments like “OMFG,” “lol,” and “hahahah” (Stelter; Madkour). Because live broadcasts on Justin.tv are recorded as part of a user’s channel, other users screen-captured images from the video or downloaded the video and reposted them elsewhere online before website administrators could take it down (Gannes). Biggs was not the first to chronicle his suicide online. In 2003 an Arizona man described his overdose on drugs in a chat room, and in 2007 a British man hanged himself while on webcam. In each of these instances, “other users reportedly encouraged the individual” (Stelter).

The internet can be a cruel place. Stories about bullying and hate speech online are ubiquitous. Of course, it can also provide safe spaces, as it did for Tyler Clementi when he posted about his problems with his roommate on JustUsBoys and Yahoo forums. But a common narrative about the internet is that because of the anonymity it provides, the narcissism it encourages, the social distance between people, and our increased physical isolation from each other, it breeds cruelty and makes empathy difficult. Professor Jeffrey Cole of the University of
Southern California explained the Justin.tv situation to the *New York Times*: “The anonymous nature of these communities only emboldens the meanness or callousness of the people on these sites. [. . .] Rarely does it bring out greater compassion or consideration” (Stelter).

In this chapter, I explore the relationships among digital media, privacy, and sociability by turning to internet pioneer Josh Harris’s predictions for the Internet and privacy and cultural responses to Onid Timoner’s 2009 documentary *We Live in Public*, a fascinating and disturbing exploration of both Harris and the effects of lost privacy in digital environments. Harris, a 1990s dot com millionaire and “the greatest internet pioneer you’ve never heard of,” as Timoner’s film describes him, predicted in the ‘90s that the Internet would destroy privacy and that we would all begin living our lives online in public. He designed two techno-sociological “experiments,” both chronicled in *We Live in Public*, in order to explore constant surveillance and voyeurism, both of which led to destructive results in interpersonal relations.

The first, Quiet: We Live in Public, involved nearly a hundred participants who agreed to live in a capsule hotel in New York City at the end of 1999. The hotel was fitted with cameras and televisions everywhere: in each capsule bed, gazing at the octagon-shaped glass communal shower, and facing the toilets, which were openly visible to everyone. The second project, We Live in Public, was an experiment in 2000 in which Harris and his girlfriend Tanya Corrin lived in his apartment with webcams broadcasting their every moment on a website, where hundreds, and at times thousands, of viewers engaged with them and each other through a chat client.¹

Timoner’s documentary chronicles Harris’s rise as a businessman in the 1990s, his exploits in artistic experiments, and his ultimate fall after the dot com stock market bust in 2000. Winning the Grand Jury Prize at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, *We Live in Public* is an alarming exploration of the effects of eroding privacy and the subsequent breakdown in sociality.

¹ I will refer to the 1999 hotel experiment as Quiet, the project with Corrin as We Live in Public, and the film as *We Live in Public* (italicized) throughout this chapter.
If Harris’s experiments are an indication of the future when the internet “takes over” and we are all living our lives publicly online, then we have a pretty grim future. Participants of Quiet, with virtually no boundaries between each other, soon found that their abilities to get to know each other, and to even know themselves, were eroding. Intimacy became difficult, as one participant explains: “Because everything is exposed, there’s a tension that I feel of how to get to know each other.” This solitude even resulted in alienation from the self, as another participant observed, “It’s almost like I’ve become detached from myself” (Timoner).

Unable to handle the pressures of living in public under constant surveillance, participants became tense, and some turned to violence. In perhaps the most disturbing moment in the film, as Quiet was approaching its end, a naked, showering man violently grabs a woman, drags her into the shower, and attempts to control her body as she struggles against his advances. It’s not entirely clear from the video footage, but viewers of the film are left with the assumption that she was probably being raped in the assault.² To add to the disturbing scenario, many other participants of Quiet sat in chairs or stood nearby, observing and laughing—Harris among them.

Timoner herself and reviewers of the film have taken Harris’s experiments as indicative of the reality we are approaching, if not already in, as more and more people share their private lives online. In fact, social networking sites serve as an exigence of the film. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, Timoner explains that she had so much footage of the experiments that she wasn’t sure what to do with it until she started using social networking sites. She provides this narrative, one she repeats in multiple interviews:

> Around 2006, I saw the first status update from someone on Facebook. It said they were driving down the freeway, heading west, and I thought, ‘That is an

² Timoner herself isn’t sure if she was videotaping rape or not. In an interview, she states about the scene, “I don’t know what was really going on, whether it was rape or not. I know the guy who was in the shower and I really don’t think that that’s where he is as a human—he’s very a very gentle human being actually—but there was just a fevered pitch to the whole thing, with the spectator sport of it” (Powers).
unbelievable thing to put out there, why does anyone care?’ Then I realized that people do care. The bunker that Josh created in 1999 when he commissioned these artists to create an artificial community in Manhattan was very much a metaphor for the Internet and social networking and everything we’re seeing happening. (Alter)

In another interview, she explains that the film as “a big warning shot and a metaphor for where we could be heading with our lives online today, if we’re not already there” (“He Lived in Public”).

And the conclusion of We Live in Public promises on this warning shot, turning to the present and social networking sites as it warns viewers that they need to be concerned about the dire consequences of surveillance and sharing on these sites. Harris explains in the film that Facebook and Google are starting to do the things he predicted, “training people to automate themselves.” Timoner’s voiceover narrates that we are now being tracked online: “We enjoy the attention, the feedback, the comments.” “You, me, all of us, we live in public.” By framing Harris’s experiments as a predecessor to social networking sites, the film becomes a lesson about how we are heading down a slippery slope toward an anti-social future, if we’re not near there already.

Movie reviewers took this warning seriously and saw the film as teaching a lesson that we should all learn. Almost universally, reviewers understood that Harris’s “surveillance-themed works [. . .] seemed to anticipate today’s over-sharing Internet culture of blogs, Twitter and social-networking sites” (Alter). The film questions “our current culture so dependant [sic] on social media, i.e. Twitter and Facebook, that encourage us to publish our every action, fostering the surveillance Harris predicted we would so desperately want” (Haruta). The San Francisco Chronicle review ends pondering:
The one thing in particular that Harris anticipated was the Internet's capacity to feed relentless exhibitionism, through blogs, social networking Web sites and YouTube. Harris saw this brave new world more than a decade ago—and liked what he saw. To watch "We Live in Public" is to wonder if the world we live in is just a reflection of one man's neurosis—if Harris's mix of emotional distance and rabid self-promotion has simply gone viral. (LaSalle)

The Boston Globe review expressed concern about authentic behavior in a surveillance society, asking, “Who do you play to? Your loved ones or the ones who love watching you? If you have a Facebook account, it’s not an idle question” (Burr). Ultimately, the film is “horrifyingly revealing of where our society has headed” (Ficks).

Harris’s friend, colleague, and fellow dot com entrepreneur Jason Calacanis understands the film as a lesson for what he calls “Harris’ law: At some point, all humanity in an online community is lost, and the goal becomes to inflict as much psychological suffering as possible on another person.” In his response to the film on his blog, a post titled “We Live in Public (and the end of empathy),” Calacanis explains that We Live in Public had “turned into a nightmare” as those in the chatroom were vicious to both Josh and Corrin. Citing the users who encouraged Biggs to commit suicide as an example, as well as Lori Drew, who faked a MySpace account in order to harass teenager Megan Meier to the point that she committed suicide, Calacanis sees the internet as a “vicious” place. Because users can be anonymous and don’t have to own their behavior, people online stop recognizing each other as humans, unable to have empathy for the other, and start treating each other as objects. By looking for validation online ("harvesting our lives and putting them online"), we lose our humanity and capacities for empathy, and “without empathy, our lives are shallow, self-centered and meaningless” (Calacanis).

Calacanis and Cole are not alone in arguing that digital media and changes in privacy make practicing empathy difficult online. As I will discuss in the next section, the ways digital
media encourage certain practices in privacy has led many to see digital environments as eroding our capacity for empathy. If it’s not because we’re protected by anonymity, then it’s because we’re too private of beings, walled off from interacting face-to-face and instead engaging with each other too much through digital media. Others contend that because we share so much information online, we are reducing ourselves to information, seeing each other as instrumental objects and packets of data. Another strain of the argument is that there is just too much online, and that the ubiquity of narratives and images leave us numb, causing “compassion fatigue.” Of course, others defend openness online, arguing that social media enhances our ability for empathy, by increasing connections, helping us to understand others better, and thus making us empathetic to others.

In this chapter, I am not interested in claiming that social media encourages us to be more or less empathic toward others because of its influences on practices and understandings of privacy. Rather, I want to build a theory of how we engage with such media in embodied, affective ways in particular situations—that may or may not lead to such emotions as empathy, compassion, or sympathy, depending on a multitude of factors. In chapter one, I advocated that rhetoric scholars should turn their attention towards interfaces and practices. Here, I argue that rather than making grand claims about social media affecting our sociability, we need to look at specific practices with interfaces, and take into account users’ idioms of practice, media ideologies, and “sensuous training,” or the repeated training we receive in culture in order to develop “sensory patterns and habits” (Wysocki, “Unfitting Beauties” 104).

I find empathy a useful approach in this chapter because of its powerful centrality in both vernacular and scholarly theories as a foundation for ethical behavior and sociability. I understand empathy as “both an attitude and practice” (Lynch 6) of the “imaginative reconstruction of the experience” of another (Nussbaum, Upheavals 327). While empathy, compassion, and sympathy can have distinct meanings, I am less interested in parsing them out here and more interested in a
general approach to how we might understand the possibility of affective responses in digital environments. My focus on empathy (or compassion) is motivated because many understand it, as Martha Nussbaum does, as being “an invaluable way of extending our ethical awareness and of understanding the human meaning of events and policies” (14). Emotions, Nussbaum explains, can be considerably helpful in making ethical decisions, both public ones and personal ones (298).

My approach toward empathy here does not mean I believe that empathy is necessary for making ethical decisions and for treating each other with respect and fairness, nor does it mean that I think that empathy necessarily leads to changed behavior, or even to ethical action. Indeed, empathy is a highly complex, situated emotion that needs to be judged in context rather than dismissed outright.³

After my discussion of various deterministic accounts of empathy in social media environments, I turn to Harris’s life, providing some context for his two experiments. I then discuss Quiet and We Live in Public, exploring how the evidence they provide doesn’t seem to support Timoner’s, Calacanis’s, or film reviewers’ claims that we are indeed headed toward an anti-social future because of private lives shared on social media sites. Part of this is because of different features of the environments. Harris’s experiments do have similarities to social media: many-to-many communication through video and chat clients, the sharing of private lives through

³ The literature on empathy is vast. As Ann Jurecic notes, “Empathy is suddenly hot in the academy” (10). As Dennis Lynch notes in his 1998 article “Rhetorics of Proximity: Empathy in Temple Grandin and Cornel West,” empathy was once at the center of rhetorical studies, but by the late 1990s it had “been scrutinized, critiqued, and all but abandoned by many rhetorical theorists” (6). Compassion and empathy can be benign, but it can also be harmful for justice or rhetorical action: leading to silence, eliminating the space between individuals, used to colonize others, allowing for self-love, or ignoring one’s own complicity in others’ oppression. See Lynch (7-11); Jurecic (16-19); Newcomb; Roberts-Miller; and Kulbaga. For discussions of how empathy might be used rhetorically to complicate identification and empathic responses, or to create situations for further discourse, see Lynch; Newcomb; Fleckenstein; and Jurecic.
digital media, and collected data that is owned not by users but by the service. But the environments Harris created were drastically different from most social media environments: Users typically weave in and out of social media in their daily lives, not being confined to being present in a service 24/7. And further, Quiet included an interrogation chamber and shooting range, features that greatly influenced the environment. Claims about the future of sociability are often overblown or misstated, drawing on evidence that is far from typical user experiences and thus making claims that ignore the situated, embodied practices of users in particular environments.

**Empathy and Digital Media**

The ability to feel empathy is understood as a central aspect of sociability, and a functioning, ethical sociality is often thought of as depending on empathic responses to others. Zizi Papacharissi explains that while “sociality” and “sociability” are nearly synonymous, “sociality refers to the sum of social behaviors that permit the individual to traverse from the state of individuality to that of sociality and fellowship. Sociability, on the other hand, refers to the ability to perform the social behaviors that lead to sociality, and thus, reflects one’s inherent potential to engage in such social behaviors” (“Conclusion” 316). Because empathy is so central to our understanding of what it means to be social, claims about the inability to feel empathy in digital environments are claims about our sociability online: Unable to feel empathy, users are incapable of entering proper sociality with each other.

Deterministic views on sociability, privacy, and social media come in two general camps: those who advocate increased visibility because it promotes connections, understanding, and

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4 Harris told Quiet participants that the entire experience was free: “Everything is free. Except the video we capture of you. That we own” (Timoner).
empathy; and those who believe that the combined states of distance from each other (either anonymity or physical isolation) and increased sharing or visibility lead to an inability or difficulty to feel empathy. As with other deterministic rhetoric about technology, these views understand technologies as separate from people: either tools that can be used to make us better humans, or monstrous machines that are dehumanizing us. The utopian view holds that these digital technologies will allow us to develop better sociality through stronger connections. The dystopian view, on the other hand, fears that these technologies cause us to be less human, disembodied and abstract from ourselves and others (see Porter, “Why Technology Matters” 387). Ironically, while some of these dystopian arguments stress the body by being concerned that our identities are being reduced to information and that we are losing emotional capabilities and affective responses, they ignore bodies as they are actually practiced in specific contexts. Here I outline some of these perspectives on empathic sociability in social media environments. Noticeably, I draw on more dystopian perspectives than utopian perspectives. As Jim Porter notes, humanist perspectives on technology are more often dystopian than utopian (“Why Technology Matters” 387).

The utopian view of social media advocates more transparency and openness because this can promote empathy online. This is Mark Zuckerberg’s view, who explains his theory of openness: “Open means having access to more information, right? More transparency, being able to share things and have a voice in the world. And connected is helping people stay in touch and maintain empathy for each other” (Grossman). He believes that if people have more access to information and more connections, they can develop stronger understandings of each other and thus more empathy. In his argument for the value of publicness, Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live, Jeff Jarvis proposes that the more we live in public, the more likely we are to identify with others’ humiliation, developing a mutual empathy and ability to forgive and forget indiscretions recorded online (130). For both Zuckerberg and
Jarvis, digital technologies are tools that tap into and enhance our abilities as humans to connect, identify with each other, and be empathic.

Dystopian views on social media, privacy, and sociability take multiple perspectives, in part because they approach different concerns about privacy. Here I summarize four dystopian perspectives. First, some are concerned that anonymity, which protects users’ privacy online, leads to a lack of accountability and thus maltreatment of others, leading to what Calacanis calls “Harris’ law”: Online interactions of anonymous people will necessarily lead to cruelty.

Second, some approach a different aspect of privacy: isolation. They believe that our physical isolation from each other is leading to a fear of being vulnerable and an inability to be empathic because affective responses depend so much on bodies. Thus, unable to feel empathy, we begin to treat each other as objects. Turkle is one of the most recent academics to make this argument. Citing a 2010 study that shows “young people have reported a dramatic decline in interest in other people,” she expresses that young adults are “far less likely to say that it is valuable to try to put oneself in the place of others or to try to understand their feelings” (293). The youth she studied who developed intimacy with robots are troubling to her, for this type of intimacy shows no vulnerability and no development of empathy: Robots do not offer “alterity, the ability to see the world through the eyes of another. Without alterity, there can be no empathy” (55). Being so connected technologically means that we treat others as objects; overwhelmed by information, we are willing to treat others “with dispatch” (168). Chatroulette provides an example for her, where people log in, view a participant, and within seconds click “next” to view or talk to another (225). In effect, “people are objectified and quickly discarded,” and we have become “content to treat each other as things” (xiv). Another writer who fears how youth are becoming isolated is Hilary Stout, who in her 2010 New York Times column on “Anti-Social Networking,” argues that youth are too physically isolated, as they constantly text rather
than hang out in person. For Stout, this results in a fear of being intimate, difficulty creating relationships, and trouble developing trust in others and empathy.

While Turkle and Stout focus on the isolated, private individual who has trouble developing intimacy because they are too digitally connected, a third view sees the erosion of privacy as the problem: As users are more narcissistic, they share more and more private experiences and information online, reducing them to information and losing sense of the private self and interiority, thus creating weak connections with others. In her review of *The Social Network*, Zadie Smith argues that Facebook users are too quickly sharing their private information, thereby reducing identity to “a set of data.” Because of this, we transcend “our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires our fears,” becoming merely “connected.” Instead of deep relationships, users instead make “weak, superficial connections with each other.” She is influenced by Jaron Lanier, whose manifesto *You Are Not a Gadget* argues that by storing information online in various files, we become fragmented and urges readers to “be a person instead of a source of fragments to be exploited by users” (21). Social networking sites like Facebook create a reductive view of identity, where users become “a silly, phony set of database entries,” a situation that mediates relationships, and users treat each other impersonally, just as the government treats people (69). By altering ourselves to fit into the needs and designs of our technologies, we reduce ourselves to gadgets, Lanier argues, leading to a “leaching of empathy and humanity in that process” (39).

A fourth view holds that with so much information in the media—images and narratives, whether public stories or private lives—users are experiencing “compassion fatigue” and protect themselves by responding with numbness (C. Dean 88-89). While the term “compassion fatigue” describes a condition in response to increasing exposure to media, especially narratives of suffering and images depicting trauma, since the 1960s (90), the concept can be applied to newer media as well. With so much online to distract us, and the option to click to the next site—to, in a
way, superficially surf—users may become numb to portrayals of suffering. “The stream of images we encounter in daily experience renders the impact of any particular image highly contingent—our regard for specific images (of persons or events or commodities) is constantly challenged by the constant flow of ‘new’ images that compete for our attention” (Hinkson 134).

Privacy and empathy are then linked in multiple ways in these arguments. Our private appearance online as anonymous allows us to not be held accountable for our actions and thus we don’t have to feel empathy. Our isolation as private individuals from each other leads to an inability to feel empathy. Our over-sharing online leads to the reduction of identities to information so that users transcend our bodies and only create weak connections, losing empathy and their humanity in the process. And last, there is just too much private information online to be able to discern what and whom one should feel empathy for, so people protect themselves by disassociating from the suffering they see online.

These narratives tend to be totalizing and do not take into account the specifics of rhetorical contexts: What are the affordances of the specific technologies and interfaces being used? How are bodies actually being practiced in these environments? Who is engaging whom, and how do their past experiences and their approaches to the media affect their relationships with others online? What sort of media ecology is the writer entering in and altering? By ignoring specific contexts, these viewers can take evidence from other contexts and extrapolate them to all

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5 Carolyn Dean provides an overview of the “compassion fatigue” strain of argument (88-89, 94-98). She critiques this type of discourse because it imagines a history with affective ideals that we can no longer live up to and it restrains our imaginations (89). Her particular focus is on the metaphor of “pornography” to describe graphic images that elicit no compassion, as she argues that this metaphor actually simplifies the complexity of historical problems, functioning “as an aesthetic or moral judgment that precludes an investigation of traumatic response and arguably diverts us from the more explicitly posed question that these narratives all addresses implicitly: how to forge a critical usage of empathy” (108). Sue Tait also critiques the pornography metaphor for graphic images, writing, “The pornographic analogy misnames and elides the variety of looks engaged and their specific ethical implications” (107).
social media or all digital environments. Thus, Zadie Smith is unable to imagine the specifics of a context when she writes:

I’ve noticed—and been ashamed of noticing—that when a teenager is murdered, at least in Britain, her Facebook wall will often fill with messages that seem to not quite comprehend the gravity of what has occurred. You know the type of thing: *Sorry babes! Missin’ you!!! Hopin’ u iz with the Angles. I remember the jokes we used to have LOL! PEACE XXXXX*

When I read something like that, I have a little argument with myself: “It’s only poor education. They feel the same way as anyone would, they just don’t have the language to express it.” But another part of me has a darker, more frightening thought. Do they genuinely believe, because the girl’s wall is still up, that she is still, in some sense, alive? (Smith)

In a moment that weaves together a literacy crisis (they’re uneducated!) and a sociability crisis, Smith can’t imagine that perhaps this is just the type of discourse these users engage in. In a response to Smith in *The Atlantic*, Alexis Madrigal succinctly responds to Smith’s imagined wall post: “But I read that, and I say: She did express her feelings. Would ‘my condolences’ have been any more profound or heartfelt? Or merely more seemly.” People have been expressing themselves in “maudlin, ugly, or otherwise silly” ways forever, Madrigal points out. Sites like Facebook only make them more visible. I question if Smith would be as appalled if this youth had written a similar note and posted it on a memorial over the deceased friend’s locker at school? Probably not, because a high school locker door is differently public than a Facebook wall. The public of a hallway includes students and teachers with shared experiences and understanding of the space. There isn’t the possibility of convergent audiences whose media ideologies prevent them from seeing the humanity in the post.
The ability to extrapolate from examples and ignore the specifics of contexts and environments also allows Timoner to turn Harris’s experiments into warnings about the dangers of social media, and for reviewers of the film to follow suit. It matters not that Harris was a particular, specific human with his own eccentricities that led him to engage with others. And it matters little that his experiments included gross manipulations like the interrogation room in Quiet. The specificities do not matter in these deterministic views. In effect, we can take Harris as an example, extrapolate from his peculiarities to everyone, and wonder “if Harris's mix of emotional distance and rabid self-promotion has simply gone viral” (LaSalle).

**Josh Harris: His Biography and Philosophy**

Josh Harris’s story is largely the story of the rise and fall of an eccentric and possibly brilliant dot com millionaire. But his narrative departs from other dot com millionaires who built their fortune in the 1990s and lost it all in the 2000 dot com stock market crash because of his vision of the future, one perhaps influenced by his limited ability to connect to others and his strong belief that in the future everyone would be living their lives online, in full visibility for everyone else—in public. His eccentricity combined with his vision of the future—one that makes Zuckerberg’s value in transparency and openness seem conservative—led him to see his companies like Pseudo as art projects rather than business ventures, and for him to leave and move onto a new project once he lost interest.

Harris believes in a future in which we will all be living fully online in public and will not have privacy: We will share so much information with each other that we’ll know everyone intimately, and privacy and individuality won’t really be concepts anymore. This future he envisions isn’t something he is promoting or desiring, he claims; rather, he claims he is observing this future (Myers). His experiments, then, are tests of what the effects of such a future might be.
Harris’s eccentricity and his somewhat antisocial behavior give me pause to trust the usefulness of his experiments for arguments about sociability online—not that his personality is cause to disbelieve his vision of the future (an ethical fallacy), but rather that his personality affects how he engages with technology and the experiments he built. It’s hard not to psychologize Harris, as he himself promotes this sort of activity and *We Live in Public* draws on his childhood to explain his behavior and views. Harris describes himself as someone who doesn’t form intimate relationships and whose “emotionality is derived not from other humans, but rather from Gilligan” of *Gilligan’s Island* (Timoner). *We Live in Public* paints his anti-social attitudes as a product of a father who was away on business frequently, a busy, distant mother, and being raised mostly by television. Harris was a “wild child” who, in his words, “love[d] his mother virtually, but not physically” (Timoner). The television, especially *Gilligan’s Island*, raised him to the point that he claims that Sherwood Schwartz, the creator of *Gilligan’s Island*, had a bigger impact on American culture than John F. Kennedy or Marilyn Monroe. His empathy and connections to others are portrayed as weak in the film, represented by a video he sent his mother when she was dying of cancer, a video his brother describes as a “pretty cold tape” in which he doesn’t express much concern for her (Timoner).

Harris moved to New York City in 1984 with only $900 to his name to work at a market research company, but over the next decade and a half, he became central to the technology industry developing there. Quickly, he had his sights set on the future and the Internet in a way that others couldn’t yet imagine, seeing the Internet as a technology that would fundamentally change media, business, and social relations. He founded his first company, Jupiter Communications, which collected data and created reports on how people would be using the Internet. Jupiter’s first report sold four to five hundred copies at $300 each, and the company quickly grew. When Jupiter went public, Harris became worth $80 million (Timoner). His next venture to make him millions was Pseudo.com, the first interactive online television network.
Harris soon became a central figure among the “Dot Com Kids,” the rich young adults who worked in downtown Manhattan during the dot com boom. Calacanis describes the Dot Com Kids as those who “became celebrities because you knew how to set up a modem.” But “Harris was the most unique character” amongst them, “without a doubt” (Timoner). He gained notoriety not only for his business decisions, but also for throwing outrageous parties and for his alternative personality he would perform at those parties: “Luvvy,” a clown-like homage to Eunice “Lovey” Wentworth Howell from *Gilligan’s Island*. As Luvvy (see Figure 5-1), Harris spoke in a high-pitched voice, wore clown makeup, and dressed in shawls and scarves like Mrs. Howell. Luvvy made appearances at Harris’ parties and fund-raising events, turning off not only friends, but also alienating employees of Pseudo, who were interested in wooing investors. Corrin, his future girlfriend, described Luvvy as a “sweet desire to connect” to others, though others found the persona off-putting (Timoner).

Harris’s parties were well-known and attended in Silicon Alley, the name given for the area of Manhattan in the 1990s “where scores of businesses have been set up to create material for the World Wide Web, CD-ROM’s and other forms of new media” (Gabriel). Attendees at the parties included models, go-go dancers, videographers, experimental artists, and the “nerderati” of Silicon Alley. The parties involved a host of activities, including computer-generated images projected onto walls, computers running video games like *Doom*, and even walls painted to replicate the environment of *Doom* (Carr; Gabriel). Calacanis describes Harris’s parties as like raves, with models wearing next to nothing sitting on the laps of nerds (Timoner).

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6 *Doom* was one of the first and most popular first-person shooter game for personal computers. Users on networks could play with or against each other as they attempted to shoot and kill demons and other under-worldly monsters.

7 When I imagine Silicon Alley in the 1990s, I imagine quite a frivolous and exciting time. But I also imagine a boy’s club of young men objectifying and demeaning women. The *New York Observer* reported on various sexual harassment lawsuits against Silicon Alley businesses, including Pseudo, in 2000. Calling the environment “a boys’ club, flush with new wealth and the
Harris hosted these parties in part to find talented young adults who could work for Pseudo, the first interactive online television network that he founded in 1994. By 1999, Pseudo was reaching more than two million viewers a month, with more than 45 shows on nine channels, including content such as music videos, professional wrestling, movies, and computer games (R. Katz, “EchoStar”). Most of Pseudo’s programming included viewer interaction, usually through a chat room next to the four-inch video, and on-air characters often responded to viewers who chatted during the shows. David Kirkpatrick, writing for New York Magazine in 1999, explains, “All of its shows are based in reality, targeted to people obsessed with a narrow subject, and presented in a way that seems authentic to hard-core fanatics, whether they are urban gangsta-rap

sense of entitlement that goes along with it,” the article explains that some women employees complained of a hostile environment to women and being asked to do menial tasks (Kaplan).
fans or Midwestern pro-football devotees” (“Suddenly Pseudo”). One such show was “Levi.com Semester Online,” a reality show similar to MTV’s The Real World that followed college students who were given a limited budget for a semester and had to spend it all online (R. Katz, “Pseudo”). Pseudo seems particularly phenomenal in retrospect when we consider that most people with an Internet connection in the ‘90s were using modems. By late 1999, only 1.25 million Americans had broadband internet, which meant that downloading streaming video content was slow for most users (Rutenberg).

Harris believed that companies like Pseudo were in direct competition with the large television networks, but had an important advantage: They could track their audiences more easily. When 60 Minutes profiled Harris and Pseudo, Harris bluntly told correspondent Bob Simon his goal was to take CBS down, explaining, “My advertisers can be delivered a very specific audience. And guess what? My audience can be counted because they’re computers.” “We are in the business of programming people’s lives,” he ominously added (Timoner).

Pseudo predated and paved the way for much of the Web content we see today, whether from mainstream entertainment industries (whose shows are often placed online, whether on their websites on services like Hulu or Netflix) or from sites with user-generated content (such as YouTube, or Cam4, a site on which users stream their sexual activities and chat with other users). While Pseudo went bankrupt in 2000, the model of streaming video content has become a integral part of the internet. Harris was not alone in recognizing the potential for web content to challenge mainstream television at the time. Slow streaming speeds didn’t stop some television executives from leaving places like CBS and ABC to start or join internet television startups, like Jon Klein, the producer of 60 Minutes and 48 Hours for CBS. While CBS spokesman Gil Schwartz told The New York Observer in 1999 that the internet “is not a replacement for mass media,” others like Hugh Downs (who entered television when it wasn’t yet clear it would successfully surpass radio)
predicted, “I think the time will come when Abcnews.com will be bigger than ABC News” (Rutenberg).

Pseudo’s name, according to Harris, represents the various online identities, or “faces,” people have online (D. Kirkpatrick, “Suddenly Pseudo”). By now, Pseudo has fallen into the obscurity of internet history, largely forgotten now in the minds of most web users who might remember the popularity of AOL Online and Geocities webrings but not the short-lived venture of early online television. Pseudo filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in September 2000 (Graser), which left Harris broke after he hand spent millions on his parties and his next two experiments, Quiet and We Live in Public.

By late 1999, though, Harris was bored with Pseudo, claiming it was just an art project and began planning Quiet. After his experiments, Harris largely disappeared, retreating to an apple orchard in upstate New York. In 2005, he sold his farm, where he had lived in solitude, and tried to create a new startup, Operator 11, which involved live streaming and social networking features. When he attempted to pitch the idea to companies like MySpace, however, no one was interested: Either they hadn’t heard of him, or if they had, they wouldn’t fund him because of his reputation of being frivolous with money. Failing to get Operator 11 off the ground, Harris again fled networked society, this time to largely avoid creditors, to Ethiopia, where he enjoyed the “pure humanity” of being away from media (Timoner). By August 2009, Harris was back in the States for showings of We Live in Public and interviews. He was left with only $741 in his pocket, making a living playing poker. In his profile on Harris, New York Times writer Allen Salkin describes him as “distracted by personal demons” such as theories that the FBI was tracking him because they thought he was connected to the September 11 terrorist attacks (Salkin). At this time, he was still predicting a future of decreased privacy, envisioning a service more “in real time” than Facebook and Twitter involving “dynamic interaction” and live television studios inside people’s homes that broadcast 24/7 (Kim).
Eventually, Harris believes, humans and computers will become hybrids, a sort of Singularity with a virtual hive like in the Matrix movies (Myers; Platt). A 2000 Wired magazine feature on Harris and Pseudo explains:

Harris doesn’t celebrate this imminent transition he foresees, nor does he want to hasten it. “I want to guide it,” he says, after a long moment of thought. “I want to leave artifacts, reflections, and beauty to our inhuman descendants. The idea is to be conscious that we’re doing it, make it beautiful, and deliver it in machine-readable code to the next guys.” (Platt)

*We Live in Public*, then, serves as a cultural artifact for his experiments in 1999 and 2000. Knowing full well he wouldn’t be portrayed in good light in the film, he wanted it made. As Timoner explains, “He just wanted to make sure all the work that he had done, and all the money he'd spent to create these incredible experiences, the experiment and everything, actually came to something” (Powers).

Harris’s biography is important because it calls attention to his very specific media ideology and his eccentric practices: In short, he is not the typical social media user. While he envisioned his projects as testing out a future he saw coming, it is necessary to keep in mind Harris’s own beliefs and practices when analyzing Quiet and We Live in Public. To draw the conclusions that film reviewers, Timoner, and Calacanis do about his experiments is to ignore Harris’s seeming difficulty with intimacy and empathy and his near blatant disregard for the well being of others. His own personality and ideologies about new media become strongly apparent in his first experiment, Quiet, with the incorporation of an interrogation room where participants were verbally assaulted and humiliated.
Quiet: We Live in Public

On December 3, 1999, about 100 people registered to live in a “capsule hotel” in Manhattan that Harris had titled Quiet: We Live in Public. Harris explained, “We’re building a capsule hotel to find out what the Internet is going to look like when it takes over.” Spending over two million dollars on the project, he hired multiple artists to help build “his underground society,” a compound-like structure where no one could leave during the experiment (Timoner). Business Week writer Richard Siklos described the experiment after its conclusion:

Just about every move was recorded by roving camera operators or stationary video setups. Each of the 80 Japanese capsule hotel sleeping berths was equipped with its own camera, for instance. Toilets were set against walls with no doors or partitions, and a big, octagonal shower stall with three heads and glass walls was plopped right in the middle of the floor, with a DJ next to it spinning tunes. This, and the machine-gun firing range, were just some of the creature comforts that Harris dreamed up with a cadre of hip artists. (Siklos)

Before the project started, Harris speculated that the incredible lack of privacy in the facilities would lead participants to get so intimate with each other that they really got to know each other, or it would make them all go crazy (Timoner).

Harris was interested in how participants would interact in an environment with constant surveillance and voyeurism to the point that boundaries between individuals broken down. But to paint Harris as any sort of uninterested scientist would be a mistake. Quiet was designed to not only test the effects of constant and ubiquitous exhibitionism and surveillance, but also to test the limits of the human psyche. Quiet might have been “Manhattan’s most outrageous bohemian-chic blowout, a booze-saturated salon” (Platt), but it was also a site of purposeful and intended humiliation. Harris implemented an interrogation room in which “interrogation artist” Ashkan
Sahihi asked probing questions of individuals and demanded that they engage in humiliating actions, often breaking participants down to the point of sobbing. He kept files on participants’ personal history, sexual history, and history with the law. Interrogation was required of all participants, and in the scenes presented in *We Live in Public*, Sahihi demanded participants answer questions about their history with depression, drug use, and self-mutilation. In one scene, he breaks a woman’s emotional stability by asking her to re-enact her suicide attempt, miming the movement of a knife down her wrists. In another, he orders a young man to strip naked and mime sexual activities. The interrogation was described as torture, abusive, and frightening by participants (Timoner).

![Figure 5-2](weliveinpublicthemovie.com)
Figure 5-3: The dining table at Quiet (Source: weliveinpublicthemovie.com)

Figure 5-4: A camera shot of Josh Harris inside the communal shower at Quiet (Source: weliveinpublicthemovie.com)
The interrogation room in particular sets Quiet off from Internet sites, making it not exactly the “perfect analogy of what the Internet will be like” that Harris claimed it was (Timoner). The effects of interrogation specifically is not exactly minimized in the movie, but the film makes important moves to make the scenes depicted—particularly the man being told to get naked—about publicity as much as it’s about torture. In close proximity to this scene another participant is presented in the film, explaining that if you told someone to take off their pants, they wouldn’t do it, but if you asked them to do it in front of a camera, they would. In this way, the film can portray the humiliation of the interrogation as being as much a part of the desire for publicity as it is about coercion.

The interrogation room was not the only feature that makes the architecture of Quiet not quite analogous to the Internet. The Internet’s architecture is built on links and connections, making associations between sites, files, and people. Social networking sites make this explicit through creating ways for users to connect and disconnect from each other, generally “friends” on sites like Facebook, MySpace, Google+, or YouTube; “followers” on sites like Twitter and Tumblr; or “contacts” on services like Skype. But these connections didn’t exist in Quiet. Instead, Quiet was an insular building, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. There was no escape and no architecture for connections. As one participant explained, “Josh was the puppet master creating this chaos and not connecting any of the puppets together, but letting their strings get tangled.”

It seems that early in the experiment, Quiet was fun, lively, sociable, and (perhaps above all) debaucherous. One participant describes the event as enabling an ability to “go past all shame and put yourself out there, raw.” Another, bartender Gabrielle Penabez, explains, “It really inspired people to do things they wouldn’t do anywhere else in the world. There was a real sense of freedom even though you were also chained by the concept of being watched and video taped”
Participants let loose, performing for the cameras and for each other, dancing, having sex, and showering together uninhibited.

But while the experiment seems to have begun with openness, the openness and surveillance became a problem for participants, limiting intimacy, harming sociability, and even leading to a loss of sense of self. One participant in Quiet explains that “because everything is exposed, there’s a tension that I feel of how to get to know people,” and Harris himself says, “The more you get to know each other, the more alone you feel.” Others expressed a difficulty even knowing themselves: “It’s almost like I’ve become detached from myself,” as one put it. And participants grew tired of the surveillance, lashing out against cameras and each other. One scene in We Live in Public shows a man swatting away a cameraperson, demanding to be left alone, and another shows a man showering alone and storming off, angrily shouting that he wanted to shower in privacy, when someone else joins him in the shower. Violence too broke out, not only in the possible rape scene I described above, but also in a situation where a woman choked someone else, leaving her neck bruised (Timoner).

Either because they suspected a millennial cult or because of fire code violations, the New York police and fire departments shut down Quiet on New Years Day, 2000, less than a month after its beginning. Harris didn’t seem too disappointed that Quiet was shut down; as Timoner narrates in We Live in Public, he was already bored with the project and was ready to move onto the next one.

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8 We Live in Public makes it seem like the police shut down Quiet because it appeared like a millennial cult, especially with a firing range in the basement. Siklos reported in 2000 that it was shut down for fire violations.
We Live in Public

“With Quiet, I saw what surveillance could do to the human condition, and the next logical step was to experiment on myself by living in public,” Harris says in *We Live in Public* (Timoner). His next project, *We Live in Public*, involved webcamming his life with his live-in girlfriend 24/7 from his apartment. Harris had been dating Psuedo employee and Quiet participant Tanya Corrin, who had hosted a show five days a week on Pseudo “about real New Yorkers facing their sexual insecurities,” so she was used to being on camera (Corrin). In a cliche that repeats in the documentary, Corrin’s account of *We Live in Public* in the *New York Observer*, and other reports, instead of asking for her hand in marriage, Harris asked Corrin to live in public.

*We Live in Public* involved over thirty motion-sensor cameras positioned throughout Harris and Corrin’s New York City apartment that streamed the content live online, bringing in viewers who could chat with each other and with Harris or Corrin. On November 21, 2000, weliveinpublic.com went live, eventually garnering more than 7,000 viewers worldwide, with a few hundred logged in at any particular moment (Corrin; Blair). Cameras were placed everywhere in the apartment, including in the litter box, in the refrigerator, and even drilled up through the toilet (viewers could thus see either the unpleasant results of defecation, or Harris’s cat Neuffy licking from the bowl). The apartment was equipped with 72 sensitive microphones, and cameras could record in infrared if it was dark (Timoner).

In what Corrin describes as the “giddy first month,” Corrin and Harris’s relationship seemed to be going smoothly (Timoner). Viewers poured in from around the world, and initially they were very interested in talking to Harris. However, at least in the beginning, viewers seemed more interested in seeing Corrin as “the hot girlfriend” than as a partner in the endeavor. Corrin

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9 In her account of events, Corrin says that she and Harris had been dating for four years (Corrin), but *We Live in Public* makes it appear as though their relationship sparked sometime after Quiet ended. Additionally, Harris would later claim that Corrin wasn’t actually his girlfriend, but was an actor for a show, a claim that seems like a defense mechanism (Timoner).
explains that viewers “wanted Josh to talk to them. They wanted to see me naked.” For example, one chatter told Harris, “she looks horny. Why don’t you go do her?” And they wanted to see sex. Corrin and Harris covered cameras or had sex under sheets to prevent being watched, and lewd comments from viewers led Corrin to start doing “a ridiculous gym-class technique” to change clothes in a way that didn’t reveal her naked body (Corrin).

However, the relationships in We Live in Public began to change. While Corrin and Harris’s relationships started out “giddy,” it took a turn for the worse, and while online chatters at first wanted to talk to Harris and see Corrin, the population of chatter shifted attitudes, and Corrin began to find a community in those who were supportive of her and who she could engage with (Corrin). Corrin began to understand We Live in Public as “creating this new kind of reality where we’re very connected to people”; in one example, she had misplaced her wallet, and users helped her by telling her where it was (Timoner).

While Corrin’s relationship with chatters began to strengthen, her relationship with Harris began to become distant. The two were barely talking. Harris also began to chat with viewers in Luvvy’s voice, which bothered some viewers, and some began to call him boring and wanted him voted out, much like participants of Survivor are voted off the island (Corrin). As their relationship deteriorated, the chatroom became Corrin’s “confessional,” helping her as “friends and therapists” to see the emptiness of her relationship (Corrin).

When Corrin and Harris would fight, each would retreat to their chatrooms. As We Live in Public shows, their behaviors changed in the fights: Instead of attempting to resolve fights, they were instead performing for their viewers, attempting to belittle each other and one-up each other. Corrin describes the situation: “When you’re having an argument with a lover, the best thing you can do is stop and really listen to each other. But when you’re arguing in public, it’s about egos, and its’ about winning, and you have an audience. It’s terrible” (Timoner). Arguments became a performance for an audience, one premised on winning points and support
from those in the chatroom. Harris explains, “Anything we could think of to hurt the other person, we did” (Timoner). After a fight, each would turn to their computers to viewers’ perspectives on the fight.

The relationship deteriorated to the point of “alienation,” and eventually resulted in a fight in which Harris wanted to have sex but Corrin didn’t, in part because of the cameras. Harris grabbed her too strongly by the arms, and Corrin reacted by shouting at him, denouncing his physical violence, and leaving (Timoner). Corrin moved out on day 81 in a teary goodbye that went un-filmed because the cameras were down (Corrin). After her departure, Harris was alone to live in public, and viewership on the website plummeted from roughly a thousand a time to ten (Timoner).

Alone, Harris eventually began to feel mentally ill and decided to move out. He explains that his viewership had become the “basis of personal self worth,” and he felt in little control over even his own thoughts. With Quiet, he had been in control of the subjects of his experiment, but now he felt like he was the “rat,” and the surveillance of an audience led him to believe that they not only observed his actions but also controlled his fantasies and invaded his consciousness. On this surveillance, he observes that “Big Brother isn’t a person, it turns it”—it’s the “collective conscious” (Timoner).

What Does Josh Harris Teach Us About Social Media and Privacy?

In two socio-technical experiments, Harris explored the implications of what he believed would be the future of the Internet, when it takes over and we turn completely exhibitionist and voyeuristic, giving up privacy in favor of visibility. Viewing the projects in retrospect and in the context of the rise of social media, Timoner saw the experiments as a warning for our present
time, and reviewers of the film agreed. But what does Josh Harris teach us about social media and privacy?

My answer is not much. Both of the environments he built, while sharing similarities with social media, have enough structural differences that the effects they explore don’t really match. If we turn to the technological features of social media that I pointed out as important to understanding privacy in chapter one, Harris’s projects don’t fully match: Data isn’t aggregated, information doesn’t persist, nothing is searchable, and nothing is replicable. Of the four structural affordances of social networking sites that Danah Boyd claims changes sociality on these sites—persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability—Harris’s projects seem to provide only scalability, in that experiences were broadcast and reached a broader audience (Boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” 45-48). Further, in the case of Quiet especially, participants were fully immersed in the experiment, unable to leave. This was not some sort of experiment about how people would integrate technologies into their lives and what the effects might be. Rather, Harris foresaw a disembodied future in which we are all “constrained” in “virtual boxes,” and he created a physical box to confine people (Timoner).

Thus, the film relies on a false dualism between the physical and the virtual. In his prophetic claim that the Internet will “take over,” Harris too quickly ignores the everyday lives of people, and how, as Nathan Jurgenson puts it in his Surveillance & Society review of the film, “digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other” (377, emphasis original). The grand dualism of digital and physical reproduced in the film makes it seem as though users of social networking sites will start revealing everything, a totalizing drive toward publicity. But as I explained in chapter one, visibility, exposure, and publicity is always in tension with privacy,

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10 To clarify what I mean that information does not persist in Harris’s experiments: They did not exist as something accessible after the moment of creation within the experiments themselves. Certainly, the video recordings persisted, but they were owned by Harris and not accessible to participants during the experiment.
concealment, and withdrawal. As users share their lives, they also become experts in deciding what to conceal (Blatterer 79; Jurgenson 377-378).

Harris’s choice to turn to 24/7 video surveillance tells us even more about Harris’ understanding of the physical and digital. Why would someone who believed that the Internet will take over create a project that more accurately explores what happens to the physical interaction of bodies in a hotel when cameras and televisions are everywhere? Jason Farman’s explanation of embodiment helps explain Harris’s choice, I believe. He follows Kenneth Lipartito in asking why so many innovations that allowed people to talk on the phone with video capabilities, like AT&T’s 1964 PicturePhone, have failed in the past, and why single-medium technologies, like sound over the phone, have been so popular in contrast (20). Farman makes the distinction between practicing bodies and experiencing bodies:

Such technological approaches assume these categories exist a priori and thus the more sensory information we are given about our connection with someone, the more intimate our communication will be. Ultimately, these technologies [the PicturePhone and Apple’s FaceTime] attempt to reduce the practice of embodiment because, from this perspective, bodies aren’t practiced but only experienced. (21)

We do not just experience our bodies, Farman argues. Rather, embodiment is a spatial practice. Telephones were so successful because they are “cool” media, in Marshall McLuhan’s coinage, meaning that they provided limited information and required users to fill in sensory information that was absent; media like the telephone “require us to practice embodied space” (20). Believing that by webcamming our bodies and spaces, by providing as much sensory information as possible, we would become more intimate, Harris reduces bodies and spaces from things we practice to things we experience.
Not only is it a mistake to extrapolate from Harris’s experiments to social media sociability today because the environments he created differ significantly from social media, but it also a mistake to do so because we mis-identify the practices of one individual with everyone using social media. Sometimes it is helpful to investigate someone’s practices with a technology and speculate what that might mean for other’s practices. Indeed, it would be impossible for companies to usability test new technologies if we couldn't, and it would be difficult to build theories of rhetoric without situated evidence. However, Harris was no typical user of digital technologies. At the risk of pathologizing him, I think we should be cautious from drawing conclusions about broader sociability based on the practices of someone who seemed to have so little regard for others. In one of the few reviews of *We Live in Public* that was more cautious of repeating Timoner’s technological warnings, Manohla Dargis calls Harris “a manipulator of sizable economic means whose motivations, ethics and sanity were all in question. He compared himself to Warhol, an analogy some journalists ignorantly parroted, but he comes off as a rich bully who enjoyed buying other people’s time and even their tears.” Dargis expresses that the film doesn’t actually “explore the nuances” of being visible online, and humorously concludes, “Ms. Timoner sees [Harris] as a cautionary tale as well as a visionary; what I see is that, as with many things, too much ‘Gilligan's Island’ can be bad for you.”

To say the film tells us very little about actual social media practices and sociability online is not to dismiss the film. It does indeed offer a wonderful exploration of the values of privacy for intimate relationships, for authentic self-presentation, and for self-preservation. Evidence in the film is abundant that privacy matters. It’s important for identity development, as we need spaces away from others in order to explore ourselves, both in solitude and in groups away from larger society. We need boundaries between people, or intimacy becomes impossible and it becomes difficult to get to know others. We need to be able to determine to whom and in what circumstances we share ourselves, and what aspects of ourselves we share. *We Live in
Public, then, while failing to tell us much about social media, is a fascinating exploration of the values inherent in privacy.

**Conclusion: Interfaces, Practices, and Bodies**

I have argued in this chapter that many claims about sociability in social media sites are misguided, ignoring the embodied, situated practices of actual users and the features and affordances of particular interfaces. Among them are claims made by Timoner in *We Live in Public*, reviewers of the film, and various scholarly and online commentators—many of whom are arguing that shifts in practices related to privacy are harming our ability to be socialable, particularly to be empathic toward each other.

If these accounts are misguided and too totalizing, then how might we approach sociability in social media environments? I propose that we look at the relationships between users and interfaces, focusing on embodied, situated practices rather than concocting totalizing narratives of how people relate to each other on social media. One reason for my claim is that I am suspicious of claims about the future of sociability online. I share Mark Poster’s wariness towards claims about the future:

Firm conclusions about the future of assemblages of networked computing and humans, however, must be considered foolhardy. The technology continues to change dramatically, new users go online from many different cultures and political regimes, new media combine with other media and other cultural forms in unpredictable ways. All of which suggest we are in the midst of an event of very large proportions, an emergence that is best studied closely and incorporated into one’s political choices. (*Information Please* 268)
With social media being so new, it is hard to make broad claims about sociability on these sites because so many users understand these sites in very different ways. To return to empathy, I find it hard to predict how empathic users will be in response to each other on a site like Twitter when so many people turn to it for such a variety of purposes and engage in it in a variety of ways in different situations, informed by various media ideologies.

Twitter provides a useful example because, while the basic size of a tweet has remained consistent (at a maximum of 140 characters), the service has changed over time and users approach it for a variety of reasons. Twitter began as a website in 2006 where users could only post 140-character missives and follow others’ Twitter streams. However, over time, new features were added as users began to develop idioms and practice and those practices began to spread, and as third-party applications began to use Twitter’s API to allow users to integrate other content or features into their Twitter practices. For example, users began to reply to each other’s tweets by using the “@” symbol followed by a username. Seeing this developing trend, Twitter added new features to Twitter, including making the @username text link to the user’s account, adding a “in reply to” link to the tweet so that users could see exactly what tweet users were responding to, and adding a menu on the website to see only posts that reply to you. The service has gone through other developments as well, ones that have been in response to changing practices on the site and ones that helped to influence behavior.

So the interface of Twitter isn’t stable over time, but it is also not necessarily the same each time an individual engages with Twitter: I can read my Twitter stream on its website, on its application on my desktop computer, or from my iPhone, using Twitter’s app or a second-party app. I can send tweets through SMS service, and I can set Twitter to text me anytime someone I follow tweets, or anytime I’ve been replied to. This means that there are multiple options for how I engage with the site in my daily life.
Not only is the interface multiple and changing, but users’ idioms of practice and media ideologies vary greatly on Twitter. To turn to interfaces means to look at the affordances of those interfaces, but also to look at how those interfaces are different at different moments for different users. Interfaces, as Collin Brooke explains, frequently change and are privately experienced; there is a limit to the shared experience that textual criticism tends to rely on (11). But turning our attention to interfaces does not solely mean looking at them. To look at an interface “encourages us to treat interfaces as static objects, rather than dynamic practice” (133). Brooke revises Richard Lanham’s at/through distinction provided in *The Electronic Word* by adding a third way of looking: from. Lanham proposes that digital media encourages us to toggle between looking through text—ignoring its materiality and visuality because it seems transparent—and looking at text, or noticing its design and style (Brooke 132). Brooke’s addition of looking from encourages us to consider how interfaces change and consider a user’s perspective—for example, their familiarity with an interface. He provides the trivial but useful example of switching from Mac OS 9 to Max OS X. He spent months frequently looking at the interface of the new OS, whereas with the old OS, he could more often look through it. When he returned to a machine with OS 9 months later, he found that it was no longer natural—that he had to look at it once again (133).

Looking from means taking into account various users’ perspectives on interfaces and how they actually engage with those interfaces. But users approach interfaces from a variety of different perspectives, informed by their media ideologies and their idioms of practice, concepts I introduced in chapter one. The newness of new media means that users are developing new practices, and their idioms of practice and media ideologies are not always shared. And as Ilana Gershon explains, it’s hard to predict users’ media ideologies: “People don’t necessarily share the same media ideologies. Being American, or a white middle-class American undergraduate is not enough information to predict with any degree of accuracy what your media ideology will be” (33). Users typically develop new practices together, creating shared meaning-making about the
new technologies through conversations and experimentation and developing shared idioms of practice.

These idioms of practice make Twitter a different site for different people. As of June, 2012, I follow over 500 Twitter accounts, and I witness a variety of uses for Twitter (and engage in a variety of uses myself). For some, it is a way to find news stories and share the news they read. But for others, it serves as a remediation of instant messenger, involving many quick responses that build a conversation that other users can see and join. For some, Twitter is a promotional platform for their ideas or business, or a way to build relationships with customers. For some, it’s used to coordinate meeting up or social events. Privacy practices vary a great deal among users, from impersonal tweets that share little about one’s private lives to tweets about behavior that others would see as private, including sexual activities, drug use, drunkenness, and more. Some will use the reply feature to share personal information with others, which means that mutual followers can see it, but others will turn to Twitter’s private message service for those occasions. What people share, how they relate, and their purposes for the site vary greatly, and often shifts over time or even situation-to-situation.

In addition to attending to users’ idioms of practice and media ideologies, I argue that if we are concerned about affective responses to others and ethical treatment of each other online that we should also pay attention to users’ particular aesthetic, bodily engagements to interfaces. In “Unfitting Beauties of Transducing Bodies,” Anne Wysocki critiques the idea that we share affective, embodied responses to texts that lead to a shared ethical experience. She critiques the eighteenth-century understandings of perception and aesthetics that continue to persist in approaches to new media art. These theories posit that “aesthetic judgments are possible precisely because it was believed, first, that something universal or timeless inhered in what we judge to be beautiful or to be art, and second, that each person’s bodily sensibilities gave the person visceral and so cognitive access to that universal of timeless thing” (99). While I am not discussing access
to beauty, her discussion is helpful in understanding that our bodies are not all trained the same, and we do not necessarily have shared embodied engagements with texts or interfaces. Wysocki shows how scholars of digital media aesthetics either implicitly or explicitly evoke this eighteenth-century logic, as writers like Mark Hansen, Oliver Grau, and Anna Munster “use aesthetic experience as what enables us to move from perception to ethics” (102). For example, Hansen explains that by experiencing digital art, we move from our individual embodied experiences to a common, shared, or “collective experience” (qtd. in Wysocki 103).

But bodies are not just experienced; they are practiced. Wysocki explains that aesthetics and ethics are not universally shared nor are they natural. Rather, “senses develop culturally and . . . different cultures and, within cultures, different social classes . . . have different sensory regimes” (104). Wysocki explains that “sensuous training” occurs through the repetition of experiences, “shape[d] in our varying, complex, and socially embedded environments” (104). She turns the Nintendo Wii, and in particular aesthetic and ethical responses to violent games like Resident Evil 4 and Manhunt 2, to show how ethics and aesthetics are not necessarily linked: Players can desire and enjoy violence because they are seen as “only aesthetic experiences” and thus one’s ambivalence toward the political ramifications of violence can be ignored (107).

Embodied experiences with media, then, are trained over time, and users’ idioms of practice are developed within communities of users who develop shared or conflicting media ideologies that inform those practices. In a society where it’s hard to claim that people universally share aesthetic experiences because our bodies have been trained so differently, and in new media environments where interfaces are in constant flux depending not just on structural changes, but on the perspective of users in particular moments and locations, it’s difficult, I argue, to make claims about how social media encourage or discourse certain embodied responses like empathy.

Are we becoming more or less empathetic as we engage more and more on social media sites—are these connections enhancing understandings of others and thus making us more
sociable, or are these connections superfluous, objectifying, or weak in ways that flatten our responses to each other? Do shifting practices in privacy—anonymity, sharing private lives online, communicating through digital interfaces from physical isolation—lead to less empathy? To ask these questions, I think, ignores particular bodies in particular situations. It refuses to understand that we practice our bodies, that our affective responses have been shaped in a multitude of ways, and that people use services for a variety of purposes in contingent, unpredictable ways.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Toward a Digital Literacy of Privacy

As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, privacy online is a thoroughly social and rhetorical concept and set of practices. Through my analyses of mobile device usage, sexting practices, online searches for identity, and *We Live in Public*, I have explored various rhetorical dimensions of privacy as it is understood, argued about, and practiced in digital environments. In my analyses of privacy practices and discourses, I explored concepts related to privacy: materiality (Chapter 2), identity (Chapter 3), intimacy (Chapter 4), and sociability (Chapter 5). These four concepts were important not only in framing my discussions of privacy practices in social media environments, but also in exploring the rich social dimensions of privacy: Privacy is materially practiced and important for identity development and presentation, creating intimacy with others, and being sociable.

In Chapter 2, I showed how physical spaces are social and thus up for different, conflicting uses. As mobile devices have become a part of our everyday lives, and as their use will probably increase and become even more integrated into our everyday social, work, and political activities, it is important to see how users draw on these devices in situated, embodied ways that do not mean they are “absent” from their environment. Instead, users use these devices to help make sense of place, to interact with others, and to manage their physical privacy and accessibility. Importantly, this means calling attention and questioning idealized visions of public and social engagements, like nostalgia for coffee shops as ideal places for spontaneous face-to-face sociality, and instead attending to actual material practices if we are to see how people integrate mobile devices into their social and political activities.
In Chapter 3, I argued that because of the affordances of digital media (particularly permanence, searchability, and aggregation) that identity is externalized and left as a series of digital traces in a variety of places online. This means that users turn to the Internet to research others and build a digital dossier about them in order to construct their identity. This rhetorical and literate activity demands our attention, as increasingly, digital media is afforded trust about the truth of others. As Dharun Ravi’s construction of Tyler Clementi’s identity through Internet searches shows, constructing another’s identity through searches involves finding information from a variety of sources and is social, involving the collaboration of others to make meaning. Importantly, this identity research also functions in the logic of the closet: a secret that is known but kept from the individual being researched. Ravi, for example, seems to have never talked to Clementi about what he already knew about him. Digital evidence has become increasingly important to construct others’ identities, as Gawker took a similar route to build Clementi’s identity after his suicide, the courts and jury had to rely on digital evidence to construct Ravi’s identity, believing it had more credibility than personal testimony.

In Chapter 4 I explored how the moral panic around sexting has very serious gendered consequences, as, like other popular discourses about privacy in digital environments, the onus for protecting privacy is placed disproportionately on girls and young women. That young men expect to receive naked or nearly naked images of girls and women, and that people will forward these images on, is naturalized in these discourses. Privacy, as an expectation that others’ bodies are inviolable, has not yet been fully extended to girls and women and remains a tool of a sexist culture.

Will social media encourage a stronger sociability, since we can know more about others and then possibly develop more empathy for them, or will it encourage a lack of empathy, as users become narcissistic, reduce themselves and others to information, and retreat from face-to-face communication to contact each other mostly through screens? In Chapter 5, I argued that this
dichotomy asks the wrong questions because it ignores the particularities of specific social media environments and the idioms of practice, media ideologies, and bodily trainings of users. Through my analysis of Josh Harris’s socio-technical experiments on surveillance and privacy and Ondi Timoner’s film *We Live in Public*, I showed how the architecture of an environment matters to understanding sociability in these interfaces, but so do particular bodies. We need to understand bodies as practiced rather than experienced, and any concerns about sociability should be focused in particular environments and attend to how users in those environments understand the media, share (or don’t share) literacy practices, and practice their bodies.

In many of the discourses I analyzed throughout this dissertation, *privacy* was juxtaposed explicitly with *public*. When Dharun Ravi violated Tyler Clementi’s privacy with his webcam, news stories explained inaccurately that Ravi posted a video online, outing Clementi as gay and making the video public. The MTV educational film on sexting is titled *Sexting in America: When Privates Go Public*, implying that if a private sext is forwarded on, it becomes public and available to everyone. And Harris’s projects were titled “We Live in Public,” a title Timoner draws upon for her film. In short, these discourses imply that if a private aspect of one’s life is made more accessible, it must be public.

These discourses imply that if something isn’t fully private, it must be public, visible and accessible to everyone. The logic of the public/private distinction that Jeff Weintraub lays out—dichotomies of withdrawn or hidden vs. visible to all and individual vs. collective (4-5)—are reinforced through these discourses in ways that ignore accessibility of information, how information actually travels, and how people actually practice privacy and visibility in situated ways in their various media ecologies. The grand dichotomy of public and private provides no nuance when we fail to see how information or activities might be differently private in situations, or both public and private.
We need to stop thinking of privacy in terms of not public and instead start thinking of it in terms of access: Who has access to information and how does information flow? What are the methods and mechanisms of access to information? Of course, people have always thought of private information in terms of access: Secrets are whispered and become differently private but not accessible to everyone; people often wait for the right time, place, and medium to convey information to others in order to control access to that information; you probably selectively give out your cell phone number in order to control access to you. In practice, privacy and publicity have never been fully opposites. But interfaces and privacy policies of social media sites like Facebook encourage users to think in terms of either private or public. Some scholars have attempted to counter this binary opposition. In terms of law, Helen Nissenbaum encourages the concept of “privacy in public,” which admits that some information might be available in public but still considered private, and that laws need to take into account issues of access, aggregation, and dissemination that threaten privacy (113).

Patricia Lange’s ethnography of young YouTube participants is on the right track by focusing on how users limit or create access to videos. Lange terms videos “publicly private” if users share private information but use both social and technical mechanisms to limit access (such as obscure tags), and she calls videos “privately public” when the content is made widely accessible but the video doesn’t share much private information. YouTube users in her study engaged in a variety of behaviors in order to control (or attempt to control) access to their content: friends-only videos, use of obscure tags to limit viewership or popular tags to hopefully bring in viewers, and titles that are unlikely to draw in viewers or come up in searches or in “related videos” lists.

Many social media users are already practicing this type of privacy literacy. As Sonia Livingstone has found, teenage users of Facebook and other social networking sites did not understand privacy as tied to the disclosure of information, but rather as something “centred on
having control over who knows what about you” (404). Livingstone found that users were making deliberate choices about what information to share and with whom to share that information. Kate Raynes-Goldie reports that participants in her study were often vigilant about privacy on Facebook: They deleted wall posts, removed tags on photos, and made up fake profile names to make it difficult to find the profile via searches. These studies of social media users reveal two ways that users attempt to control their privacy on these sites: formal structures built into the interface itself (e.g., settings, friends lists) and informal structures that circumvent a site’s design (e.g., obscure YouTube video tags, fake Facebook profile names).

One of the values of rhetorical scholarship, I argue, is to not only analyze and critique rhetorical actions and practices, but to help prepare rhetors for making situated choices in their own lives. As Collin Brooke explains, “A rhetoric of new media, rather than examining the choices that have already been made by writers, should prepare us as writers to make our own choices” (15). In this conclusion, I draw on the analyses I’ve provided throughout this dissertation in order to advance a literacy of privacy in digital environments. By this, I do not mean a set of practices that should determine behavior, or see certain behaviors as more ideal than others, but rather as a heuristic for understanding how users of digital environments might manage and approach privacy in particular situations.

There are dangers in taking a literacy approach to managing privacy online. One of those dangers is how literacy has historically been tied to morality and thus proper behavior and certain expectations about privacy—particularly the private experience of reading a book. As I explored in Chapter 1, current privacy crises and literacy crises in response to the Internet tend be interrelated. As early as 1994, Sven Birkerts was arguing that the Internet was leading to a decline in literacy. For Birkerts, privacy and the private life were central to this decline in literacy. Without the private reading experience with a print book, our culture would lose its sense of the private self (164, 220). Zadie Smith also echoed this concern about the loss of the private self,
worried that sharing information online was leading to an exteriority that reduces our selves to data.

Literacy and privacy have an interdependent historical relationship, as both conceptions arose concurrently in the West with modernization and the development and spread of print. As Walter Ong explains, the mobility and accessibility of print books (as opposed to scroll manuscripts) afforded scenes of private reading in silence and isolation, as well as the conception of private ownership of words (128). But the entanglement of privacy and literacy also creates ideals that can marginalize certain groups. For example, Ong provides a quick parenthetical that warrants dwelling upon: “Teachers of children from poverty areas today are acutely aware that often the major reason for poor performance is that there is nowhere in a crowded house where a boy or girl can study effectively” (128). Here Ong paints a lack of personal privacy as being a cause of a lack of literacy, and thus continues, surely unintentionally, an idealized literacy in private, one that he historicizes through the development of print but doesn’t critique as perpetuating certain middle class values about the home.

Literacy as a concept, then, carries with it the weight of the book, not only as an idealized site of literacy but also as an idealized sense of private literacy and private thought. Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola critique the words of Ong, Birkerts, and various others (among them Jürgen Habermas and Marshall McLuhan) not for their historical accounts of the interiorization of the self, but for claims “that books . . . ask us to think of ourselves as selves. These writers’ words are like commands—or interpellations—hailing us to see our selves and the possibilities of our world delimited between the covers of the book” (358). For Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola, the attachment of literacy to notions of the book as providing “our sense of self, our memories, our possibilities, . . . our sense of the world” (359), combined with its connotation with decontextualized, neutral skill sets that are mythologically tied to economic and political uplift, leads them to ask if we really want to keep literacy as a metaphor for digital activities.
Literacy has been characterized as a neutral set of basic skills that promises economic advancement and political involvement, a portraiture that ignores how literacy education has served as a tool of domination and assimilation and ignores the contextual and social nature of literacy practices, not as a set of basic skills for decoding text, but as a way to navigate situations. Harvey Graff, in his essay “The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Our Times,” explains that, from its nineteenth-century roots, literacy education has served as a tool of domination and assimilation and has been tightly bound to morality: spreading Protestant ethics and teaching obedience, for example (211-213). Of course, literacy scholars have complicated the notion of literacy as an individual, and thus private, neutral skills-based encounter with language, arguing instead that it is instead a social activity embedded within cultural practices (Street 2; Grabill 24; Yagelski 9-10).

While there are dangers of appropriating the word “literacy” from its historical uses, there are also benefits of re-articulating the word to describe digital practices, as Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola do when they imagine literacy as “primarily a spatial relation to information” (362), a move I see aligning itself with an ecological literacy approach. To understand literacy practices as rhetorical action (Duffy, “Other Gods,” “Letters to a Fairy City”) in ecologies in order to effect change in environments and manage one’s relationship with others is to un-articulate “literacy” from its roots in the idealization of the book and as a set of neutral, decontextualized skills and instead ask: What are the practices that users of digital media need in order to build relationships online and navigate a variety of ecologies?

As my analysis of Facebook’s privacy policy and settings in Chapter 1 shows, literacy online regarding privacy is increasingly complex, distributed, and social: Other users, through their practices and privacy settings, often control access to a user’s information and activities. Privacy online has in many ways become a “luxury commodity,” more accessible to some than to others because it now requires high levels of literacy (Papacharissi, “Privacy as a Luxury
Commodity"). Privacy concerns play out in digital settings, and this therefore means adopting a literacy approach to privacy, one that takes into account the functional abilities to manipulate privacy settings on a site, the critical abilities to question claims about a service and to interpret interfaces critically, and the rhetorical abilities to circumvent interfaces, to attend to multiple audiences, and to argue about privacy. As Stuart Selber argues, these three aspects of literacy—functional, critical, and rhetorical—are fundamentally social. Facebook’s privacy settings make the social aspect of functional literacy quite apparent: Understanding and knowing how to use settings on a social media site is inherently social, because these settings are helping to situate how and in what contexts users relate to others in the service.

Below, I outline some principles for what it means to be literate regarding privacy online. Following James Grimmelmann, I advocate an educational approach that would be “rooted in the communities it targets,” embracing the values of those communities, rather than an approach that suggests that certain settings and behaviors are more ideal than others (1204). Put differently, I am not advocating the type of literacy education promoted in the common adage “don’t post anything online that you wouldn’t want your grandmother to see.” This adage, and discourses like it, promotes a decontextualized literacy that doesn’t match up with the actual social practices of users. The desires for visibility, and the social gratifications of sharing information online, are strong and complex. A simple edict to not share doesn’t address these desires in the very real social situations in which users engage these sites.

The principles explained below are intentionally broad, and applicable to many social media sites in various contexts. That is, I do not see these principles as necessarily restrictive of any certain activities. Indeed, I hope they are developed in ways that allow for an understanding of contextual privacy, and that some users and communities of users online will be willing or desiring of more openness on some sites. Nor am I proposing a program of literacy education that targets specific groups of users. Part of the problem with popular discourses about privacy online
is that they target youth as indiscriminate and naïve. Anders Albrechtslund critiques how surveillance is often discussed in ways that focus on the shortcomings of users as ignorant or indifferent, resulting in “discourses of education and protection” that promote training youth “in a code of conduct with regards to online activities to learn how to protect themselves.” Indeed, as Albrechtslund argues, non-hierarchical, participatory surveillance and “exhibitionism” online may indeed be empowering, allowing for users to engage in identity construction and engage with others.

**Digital Literacies of Privacy: A Set of Practices**

Here I provide general sets of literacy practices regarding privacy in social media environments. Some of these practices are functional practices, such as the ability to use privacy settings on a site. Others are critical literacies, such as the ability to critique privacy policies on websites and put them in conversation with a website. Others are rhetorical literacy practices, meaning that they involve reflection on social action and engagement with the design of a site or service. As Selber explains, functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies are not meant to be discrete or restrictive categories, but are rather suggestive of practices and intertwined with each other (24). Selber’s suggestive approach to these categories is also true of many of the practices I explain below, as many of these practices involve functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies for engaging social media.

* A literacy of privacy online involves the functional understanding of how information flows on a site: how it circulates, is copied and shared, is searchable, is accessed, and is aggregated. Being functionally literate regarding one’s privacy involves not only being able to use a site, but also understanding the affordances of the site’s interface and architecture, and how that interface supports certain flows of information and access to information. This means, in
terms of sites like Facebook, also being aware if a group or event is public or private, for example, when posting to it, and understanding how information is aggregated and accessed outside a user’s control.

*A literacy of privacy online involves the functional and critical literacy of being able to navigate, use, and be critical of privacy settings.* Functional literacy in this regards means being able to understand the complex nature of some sites’ privacy settings and what those various settings mean in terms of one’s privacy. This literacy is also necessarily critical in that it is important to be able to put the privacy settings in conversation with a site’s interface in order to fully understand what material will be private in the contexts in which a user wants them to be private, and what material will be more accessible to others.

*A literacy of privacy online involves the critical information literacy of being able to find privacy policies, interpret them, use them as references, and critique them rhetorically.* Most users do not bother to read terms of service policies or privacy policies. While it would be good if everyone did, this desire seems unrealistic given how often these policies are updated, and where and in what contexts they are delivered. For instance, Apple’s App Store changes its terms of service fairly (which includes privacy statements) frequently, and users are notified of these changes and asked to agree to them whenever they download or update an app on their iPhone, iPad, or iPod Touch. If I am buying an app while hanging out with my friends, I do not want to stop and read the new terms of service (it is quite long). Not only is it unreasonable to expect individuals to read privacy policies in the contexts in which they are encountered, but, as Aleecia M. McDonald and Lorrie Faith Cranor (2008-2009) found, users encounter so many privacy policies on the Internet that it would take a typical user 244 hours per year to read all those policies. Instead of expecting users to read every terms of service agreement and privacy policy before they sign up for a service, or every time they are updated, we should expect the critical
literacy abilities of being able to find privacy policies when they are needed, interpret them and understand them in relationship to a site’s interface, and be able to analyze them rhetorically.

A literacy of privacy involves the rhetorical literacy of audience awareness and the awareness that privacy is contextual. One of the challenges of social media sites for new users is convergent audiences online: I am Facebook friends with old friends from college, old high school classmates who really have no idea who I am anymore, family members, colleagues, and many acquaintances. A rhetorical literacy online involves the ability to consider who has access to what I post, and how in what contexts I would want them to understand those expressions. This does not solely mean on my Facebook profile, but on other pages of a site as well. Ultimately, this means understanding that there are potential “eavesdroppers” even when one is writing to specific users on a page. This literacy also means understanding that contexts converge and clash.

As Nissenbaum hypothesizes (accurately, I believe), “Were we to investigate cases in which people have experienced nasty surprises of discovery, we would find that they have understood themselves to be operating in one context and governed by the norms of that context, only to find that others have taken them to be operating in a different one” (p. 225). Of course, social media users are developing strategies for handling convergent audiences online, including what Danah Boyd and Alice Marwick call “social steganography,” the tactic of posting ambiguous messages that can be read differently be different audiences through “hiding information in plain sight” (22). Teenagers they interviewed reported writing posts that might be read by parents one way, but contain different messages their friends would understand because of their shared social experiences (21-22).

A literacy of privacy involves the rhetorical literacy of circumventing a site’s design in order to protect one’s privacy. While many social media sites are quite locked down in their design—there are very few ways to change a Facebook profile or the interface, for example—there are mechanisms for circumventing a site’s design in order to protect one’s privacy.
Facebook is designed so that users are expected to use their full, real names, but some users circumvent this by choosing nicknames, using an initial instead of a full name, and other mechanisms. YouTube is designed so that you can tag a video to make it more accessible: Using obscure tags known by and shared by friends limits the possibility of others finding your video. Rhetorical literacy regarding privacy involves the awareness of how to circumvent a site’s design and to do so if deemed necessary or desirable in order to protect privacy.

*A literacy of privacy involves the functional literacies of managing notification settings on services and the rhetorical literacies of managing notifications and other technological features in order to protect accessibility to the self when it is wanted.* Digital privacy is not just information and does not just exist in digital environments, but is in constant interplay with physical spaces and bodies. As more and more people use smart phones with apps for various services, or have notifications texted to them, they are increasingly being inundated with updates from services—when their friends comment on a Facebook wall, check in at a location on Foursquare, reply to them on Twitter, and so forth. For some users, receiving these notifications on their phones is not a big deal, but for others, it may be construed as an invasion of their spatial privacy and a constant distraction. Users need to develop practices that work within their social situations and personal sense of private space and time to manage these notifications. In short, managing social spaces is increasingly becoming an issue of managing how information flows to you.

*A literacy of privacy involves the rhetorical literacy of being an ethical audience, which includes interpreting others’ actions in contexts and deciding what to do with their information.* As part of those convergence audiences online, users need to be able to put practices into context and develop an ethical stance of what to do with that information. A digital literacy of privacy does not simply mean protecting one’s own information and attempting to avoid risk, but also developing an ethical stance to how to interpret others’ activities and information. This means
putting these activities into context, understanding that other users may have different purposes and practices on a site. This also means being self-reflexive about one’s own idioms of practice and media ideologies, and understanding that these might not be shared on a site and responding to others’ use of a site with this reflexivity.

A literacy of privacy involves the rhetorical literacy of educating others as part of a community of users and is interested in the continued development of that community. This principle was perhaps exemplified in action most effectively when thousands of Facebook users joined groups to protest changes in Facebook’s interface (the development of the News Feed in 2006) and in their terms of service in 2010. Facebook users responded to the latter change with a group “People Against the New Terms of Service,” amassing over 100,000 users. Within days, Facebook reverted to the old terms of service and began developing new governing documents and mechanisms for changing them (D. Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect* 308-309). While this specific collective action might be seen as simply reactionary, it points to concerns about others’ privacy as well as one’s own. Being part of a community online and being concerned about others’ privacy means educating others: sharing links that explain new problems or settings, educating someone who might have been the target of spam or whose security has been compromised, and so forth.

Relatedly, a literacy of privacy involves the critical and rhetorical information literacy of researching recent changes in privacy policies and practices in order to education oneself and others. One problem of social media use is the easy spread of misinformation. Because, as both Barbara Warnick and Laura Gurak note, *ethos* online is often tied to text because of textual features and circulation rather than authorship, it is easy for misinformation to spread (Warnick, *Rhetoric Online* 34-35; Gurak, *Persuasion and Privacy* 83-103). Because of increased anxieties around privacy, due to changing policies on sites like Facebook and shifting political and economic issues, users are often quick to latch onto circulating messages about privacy concerns,
reposting and sharing them. In a frequent meme that circulated broadly in 2012 when Facebook went public, many Facebook users started posting a message announcing that readers—whether individuals, corporations, or governments, did not have the right to use their profiles for information. This meme circulated so broadly that Snopes.com, a website that investigates rumors, posted an explanation that “some simple legal talisman” does not protect users from surveillance; instead users are bound by the terms of service on a site that they agreed to when signing up (Mikkelson and Mikkelson). Thus, a critical literacy requires the ability to be skeptical of claims about privacy online and the information literacy to research these claims.

A critical literacy of privacy necessitates abilities to critique popular discourses for the power differences informing them and act upon those critiques in ethical ways. As I have shown, privacy is not a neutral term, but still carries with it historical uses that allow people to blame girls and women for their vulnerability rather than hold those who violate privacy as accountable for their violations. A critical literacy of privacy necessarily “recognizes and then challenges the values of the status quo” (Selber 81). In the case of privacy, this status quo involves the unequal expectations of privacy that are afforded women compared to men, as well as various other social structures that continue to use privacy to marginalize, exclude, assimilate, or oppress social groups.

Lastly, a literacy of privacy involves the rhetorical abilities to make privacy arguable. As I explained in Chapter 1, privacy is not some stable a priori right, but is rather a utilitarian good that people argue about in order to argue for the common good. Practices related to privacy shift in relationship to new communication technologies and in relationship to changing environments. Users of digital media (and, indeed, all citizens), need to be able to argue about privacy—what it is, what is or should be private, what are the values of visibility, vulnerability, or accessibility of information in specific situations, how we should protect privacy, and so forth. Relatedly, this also makes other terms arguable, including public, personal, and social. As none of these terms
are static and are up for deliberation, and important rhetorical ability is to argue about these classifications.

**Implications for Further Research**

Understanding privacy as fundamentally social and rhetorical opens open privacy to be arguable. Such a perspective allows us to understand privacy as not something static or solely a fundamental right owned by the individual. My inquiry here has explored popular discourses, interfaces, and practices related to privacy in digital environments, but there is still much to be said about privacy practices in digital environments. For example, while I have explored power differentials in relation to practices and understanding of privacy in terms of gender and sex, my project has largely ignored other concerns of identity and power, including how privacy is raced and classed and how it has been used to continue racial and class-based oppression, as well as how racial minorities how deployed privacy and the private in ways that might disrupt white privilege or racial hierarchies. In many ways, my project has been limited by largely ignoring issues of race and class. Additionally, my focus has been on North American arguments and practices related to privacy. In an increasingly globalized world—Facebook, after all, is used by millions worldwide—it is necessary to also examine different and competing cross-cultural understandings of privacy and how these play out in digital environments.

This dissertation has also focused on social privacy, bracketing off institutional concerns. While social and institutional privacy concerns intersect in various ways, bracketing off institutional privacy means ignoring the ways in which corporations, governments, and educational institutions also have stakes in understanding and creating meanings and practices related to privacy. For instance, social and political activity on Twitter has come under increasing attention because of governmental requests for access to user activity logs and user information.
Thus, various competing understandings of privacy converge, and various stakeholders’ interests conflict, as Twitter as a company and service must negotiate the tensions between user privacy and governmental demands for information—as well as their own identity as service for communication of a variety of sorts. Additionally, because many of these services are used internationally, these services must adhere to and negotiate competing understandings of privacy by governments. The European Union’s definition of privacy rights in digital environments is much more protective of individuals than the United States, and sites like Facebook have had to respond by changing features in order to adhere to various legal protections of users’ privacy.

Educational settings are also an important site for further investigation, particularly as the 1974 Family Education Rights to Privacy Act (FERPA) is applied to digital environments. How this act gets understood, interpreted, and deployed in different educational settings affects not only our students’ rights, but also the sort of writing assignments and activities that can be used in classrooms. For instance, in November 2011 Georgia Tech decided to ban wikis from classrooms and take down their institutional wiki system, arguing that such a system violated FERPA because students were publicly identifiable as taking a class, and that students using wikis across semesters could see who had taken the course in the past (A. Rice). Other universities have taken a much more open approach to the use of digital media in coursework. The terrain for how to understand and implement FERPA and other institutional policies for student privacy is hardly clear-cut and warrants further investigation from rhetorical perspectives.

Conclusion

I have argued in the conclusion of this dissertation for a set of literacy practices of privacy in digital environments, one I see as providing a broad enough sense of practices that it might be useful for students, teachers, and other users of social media without prescribing certain specific
behaviors about how to protect one’s privacy. As with other new communication technologies, social media are influencing notions and practices of privacy, allowing for different ways of sharing private lives with each other, different ways of managing spatial privacy, and new ways of relating to each other and to information. These new practices have been responded to with various arguments about the importance of protecting privacy and about changing sociability, often with dystopian claims about the loss of privacy or destroyed sociability. What I have tried to advance in this dissertation is a rhetorical approach that understands that privacy is not a stable concept, but is rather a cluster concept that needs to be investigated in specific ecologies to understand how users of these social media environments understand and practice privacy in embodied ways in specific situations.
Appendix

Tyler Clementi and Dharun Ravi: A Timeline of Events

The following timeline of events is adapted from the prosecution’s “Counter-Statement of Facts” provided at the time of Dharun Ravi’s grand jury indictment in April 2011, with supplemental information from Ian Parker’s 2012 New Yorker article on Ravi and Tyler Clementi, Richard Miller’s online post “Those Loose Ends: On Magic Keys and Fig Leaves,” and the Wikipedia article “New Jersey v. Dharun Ravi.”

Friday, August 6, 2010
Rutgers University sends out roommate assignments

Sunday, August 22, 2010
Ravi researches Clementi online, chatting with his friend Jason Tam on instant messenger and finding information on Yahoo forums, JustUsBoys, and Zazzle.

Saturday, August 28, 2010
Clementi and Ravi move into their residence hall room and meet.

Thursday, September 16, or Friday, September 17, 2010
Clementi and M.B. meet for the first time in Clementi’s residence hall room

Sunday, September 19, 2010

\textit{circa} 8:00 PM  Clementi asks Ravi to have the room alone

9:17 PM  Ravi posts to Twitter: “Roommate asked for room till midnight. Went into molly’s room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. YAY”

9:30 PM  Ravi and Wei instant message a friend outside of Rutgers about the webcam.

Evening  Ravi tells friends in the residence hall to come to Wei’s room if they want to see the webcam

Monday, September 20, 2010

Clement texts a friend that he “Felt violated” and “screen shotted” Ravi’s tweet

Tuesday, September 21, 2010

2:22 AM  Clementi posts his initial post to JustUsBoys as “cit2mo” about Ravi’s invasion of his privacy, writing that he was “kinda pissed at him” and asking for advice. His post receives a variety of advice over the next few hours.

3:55 AM  Clementi fills out application for a room change online, writing “Roommate used webcam to spy on me/want a single.”

4:28 AM  Clementi posts to JustUsBoys that he has requested the room change.

5:23 PM  Clementi asks Ravi for private use of the room again

6:39 PM  Ravi posts to Twitter: “Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between 9:30 and 12. Yes, it’s happening again.”

6:41 PM  Ravi texts with a friend at another university, explaining that his webcam is “pointed at the bed” and that his iChat is set to “auto accept.” He also claims there is a “viewing party” in another residence hall room.

8:30-9:25 PM  Clementi talks with his resident assistant about Ravi’s invasion of his privacy.

9:00-11:00 PM  Ravi attends Ultimate Frisbee practice.
9:25-11:19 PM  Clementi unplugs Ravi’s computer.

9:33 PM  Clementi texts a friend explaining that he “Shut down and turned off the power strip” to the computer.

10:19 PM  M.B. arrives at Clementi’s room.

**Wednesday, September 22, 2010**

12:03 PM  Clementi emails his resident assistant and the resident assistant’s supervisors, writing, “I feel like my privacy has been violated. I am extremely uncomfortable sharing a room with someone who acted in this wildly inappropriate manner.”

2:04 PM  Ravi texts a friend that the webcam “got messed up and didn’t work LOL.”

3:00 PM  The resident assistant tells Ravi about Clementi’s complaints.

8:42 PM  Clementi posts to Facebook from his phone: “Jumping off GW Bridge. Sorry.”

8:47 PM  Ravi texts his apologies to Clementi.

9:40 PM  Rutgers Police Department calls Residence Life at Rutgers to check on Clementi’s welfare. Police talk to Ravi.

11:08 PM  Ravi deletes his previous tweets about the webcam and posts new tweets.

**Thursday, September 23, 2010**

12:02 PM  Rutgers University Residence life forwards Clementi’s email to Rutgers University Public Safety.

6:15 PM  Wei is interviewed by the police. Ravi texts her during the interviews.

10:00 PM  Ravi provides a statement to the police.

**Tuesday, September 28, 2010**

Ravi and Wei both charged with invasion of privacy.
Wednesday, September 29, 2010

*Gawker* publishes 3 posts about Clementi and Ravi. The third post includes screenshots of Clementi’s JustUsBoys posts and Ravi’s Twitter stream. Clementi’s body is found.

April 20, 2011

A grand jury indicts Ravi on 15 counts, including invasion of privacy, bias intimidation, and tampering with a witness and with evidence.

May 6, 2011

Wei reaches a plea bargain with the prosecution. All charges against her were dropped in exchange for her testimony against Ravi.

February 2012

Ravi’s trial begins.

March 16, 2012

The jury finds Ravi guilty of invading Clementi’s privacy, bias intimidation, and tampering with a witness and with evidence.

May 21, 2012

Ravi is sentenced to 30 days in prison, 300 hours of community service, and a $10,000 fine, as well as required counseling for cyberbullying and diversity.
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