CONVERGENCE RHETORICS: NEGOTIATING DIGITAL AND OFFLINE IDENTITIES

A Thesis in
Communication Arts and Sciences

by

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Advances in digital communication have made necessary new approaches to understanding rhetoric and rhetorical exchanges. In this thesis, I examine what I describe as networked rhetorics, wherein rhetorical fragments created by various Web user-rhetors come together to shape rhetorical discourses. I have identified three discourses for analysis, all concerned with the separation or convergence of offline persons and online identities or personae. In each of these cases, there is a proposition of convergence, suggesting that one’s online persona represents or is part of an offline self, as bounded by a real name. First, I analyze rhetoric surrounding attacks made by the Maine State Senate on Colleen Lachowicz in the 2012 election season. The Maine GOP attacked Lachowicz by referring to her World of Warcraft video game character and statements she made under the name associated with the account, Santiago. Second, I examine mourning for Sean Smith, a U.S. diplomat killed in the Benghazi attacks of 2012. Smith, an avid player of the video game EVE Online, was mourned by the EVE Online community and the U.S. State Department with a eulogy given by Hillary Clinton. In the mourning process, the EVE community and the State Department mourned both Sean Smith and his online persona, Vile Rat. Finally, I delve into two articles published on the technology website Ars Technica. The articles investigate Edward Snowden’s past on the Ars Technica forums, where he used the name “TheTrueHOOHA.” In each case, networks of rhetoric negotiate whether these online personae are separate from the online persons identified (Colleen Lachowicz, Sean Smith, and Edward Snowden). To understand these networked rhetorics, I explore three particular features of the discourse, which I describe as frames and topoi. First, I employ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s theorizing about the appearance/reality pair in rhetoric, as it pertains to reasoning about values. Second, I dig into perspectives on public and private communication and life. Finally, I analyze works of classical rhetoric by Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero, and the author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium, seeking to
understand how one might praise or blame an individual in performing various roles or *personae*. In total, each *topos* guides the networked rhetorics, shaping the features of the largely political discourses. The rhetors in each network tend to stake claim in “truths” or “realities,” creating hierarchies of value, which shape understanding of identity and its meaning, both on the Web and offline.
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PREFACE

Though it is unconventional to offer a preface to a Master’s thesis, I have chosen to add a preface in the hopes of alleviating confusion about a few choices I have made in this document. The subject matter of this thesis lends itself to certain practices, which I will outline below.

First, the reader will notice that style is not consistent within quoted material. I have chosen to leave undisturbed the style of writing within the comments and statements cited in the thesis. Outside the quoted material, I have followed the conventions of the Chicago Manual of Style. Within the quoted material, the reader might notice inconsistencies in a few areas: quotation mark usage (single or double), ellipses usage, misspellings, grammatical errors, and short-hand references. The material is still readable, but might stand out as not adhering to certain conventions. I have chosen to leave these various problems in quoted material to preserve the discourse in as faithful a manner as possible. This is especially necessary because I investigate in this thesis negotiations of values within communities. To edit the stylistic conventions of the communities would risk disrupting the meaning of the discourse.

Second, I have included a selected bibliography instead of a full bibliography. I have selected the academic works cited in this thesis, as well as academic works contributing to my thinking. In narrowing to academic sources, I hope to reduce the clutter of the various web pages and news articles I cite, leaving the sources I most anticipate my readers seeking to explore.

Finally, I have included a glossary to help clarify key terms in the thesis. Many of the terms used within the thesis can become confusing, particularly as they are used by those engaging in the networked rhetorics I investigate. The glossary is located on page 158.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creation of this Master’s thesis would not have been possible without the help of a number of generous and brilliant individuals. Many individuals have guided my research in various ways and have also cared for my person. I owe the deepest and sincerest gratitude to my remarkable adviser, Dr. Rosa Eberly. Her seminar in Rhetoric and Poetics served as the bed for the paper that sparked this thesis idea. Consistently, she has provided input on my research, providing myriad ideas and invaluable criticism on the content contained in the thesis. She serves as an impeccable example of an interdisciplinary citizen-critic-scholar. Without her care and compassion throughout this process, my writing would not be as strong, my mind would not be as open, and my future would not be as exciting.

I also owe special thanks to Dr. J. Michael Hogan, for helping me develop this thesis idea. Dr. Hogan was immensely helpful in directing the future course of my research. In discussing the paper I was writing at the time in Dr. Eberly’s seminar, Dr. Hogan helped me flesh out the World of Warcraft paper idea into the foundation for my MA thesis, the result of which is the work contained here.

I am grateful for the help of each of my seminar instructors, but I am particularly grateful on a few counts. First, I thank Dr. Christopher Johnstone for his invaluable and copious feedback on the Vile Rat project. I also appreciate greatly the advice Dr. Michele Kennerly provided as I formulated the idea that turned into that project. Dr. Stephen Browne deserves special gratitude for the many intellectually stimulating conversations we have had, including a number of conversations related to this thesis project, and for critiquing my writing for publication. Finally, I thank Dr. Thomas Benson for his immensely helpful input on the direction of this thesis, especially following the meeting for my thesis proposal.

I would also like to thank the many faculty I have not named here, as well as my graduate student colleagues. The culmination of their input on my writing and my ideas is apparent in this thesis.
Chapter 1

Introduction: Networked Rhetoric and Identity Convergence

In 1984, Sherry Turkle described what was then a relatively new phenomenon: the shaping of human identity in relation to computer technology.\(^1\) Thirty years later, such a proposition may not seem particularly controversial or surprising. A generation of children—many of whom are now adults—has grown up as “digital natives,” scarcely knowing life in the absence of the Internet. For many of those digital natives, what they do online is an important part of life, and, indeed, of both individual and collective identity. Countless academic articles have investigated how identity is constituted, reshaped, and performed on the Web.\(^2\) What I will refer to as “online identities” in this thesis can come in many forms, such as avatars, user names, and handles. Important are the forms and expressions of these identities as communicative functions. Important, too, is what these identities mean to the corporeal people expressing themselves through online communication. But while these aspects are important, they are not the focus of this thesis. I am most interested in using a rhetorical approach to understand the construction of identity, particularly as distinctions between “online” and “offline” identities are composed and deliberated through rhetorical transactions.

Rhetorical critics have begun to take up in a serious fashion questions of digital transactions, often referred to as “digital rhetoric.” Gurak and Antonijevic argue that the term has become redundant, and they are at least partially correct in that nearly every form of rhetoric is expressed, in some way, through digital means.\(^3\) Still, the development of digital means of communication has provided new challenges for rhetorical scholars. In particular, the development of Web 2.0, or the user-participatory age of the Internet, has problematized authorship and the coherency of discourse. In many ways, the Web exhibits characteristics of rhizomes, as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. They note of rhizomes, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very
different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.\textsuperscript{4} In essence, the shape of rhizomatic systems is rather chaotic—rhizomatic systems are defined by nearly limitless connections, and generally a randomness that subverts traditional order. The interconnectedness of the Web surely seems rhizomatic, given the ability to connect any part of the network (say, a scholar living in central Pennsylvania) to any other part of the network (say, a blue-collar worker in China). In a rhizomatic system, discourse exists in fragments dispersed throughout. This seems to resonate with actions on the Web, where a link from a YouTube video to a Twitter post to a downloadable file can create a chain of communication.

Discourses on the Web, however, are perhaps not as dispersed as they might seem. Indeed, certain sites hold much power, and the Web’s democratic functions have been shown to be imperfect at best and almost entirely illusory at worst.\textsuperscript{5} While discourse on the Internet may not be created by one rhetorical agent (or at least largely so, as would be many canonical speech texts), it still circulates in ways we can observe. I contend this is the case because rhetoric is networked on the Web. What I refer to as networked rhetoric has been discussed by a few scholars in English studies, and mostly theorized by Jeff Rice.\textsuperscript{6} Networked rhetoric works by organizing fragments of discourse—for example, a series of individual comments on a YouTube video. These rhetorical fragments circulate together, organized into systems such as comment threads. The organized flows of networked rhetoric can overlap, bringing together rhetorical discourses through specific parts of networks. A location like Facebook could serve as a place where multiple networks overlap; so, too, could an individual’s citations of networked rhetorics on a blog post. The individuals creating rhetorical fragments may construct similar messages and work together on collective messages or action, or they may be entirely disparate. There is a spectrum, of course, running between these two poles. On all parts of the spectrum rhetoric exists, albeit often not in forms as organized as traditional, singular rhetorical texts.

The networked structure of rhetoric on the Web changes the shape of authority. This result was
seemingly predicted by scholars including Michael McGee and Lester Faigley, who wrote about the fragmentation of culture and rhetoric in the postmodern era. McGee claimed in 1990 that “texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we can call ‘fragments.’”7 In a fragmented culture, authority is eroded, particularly the authority of the “text.” In this thesis, I investigate specific, bounded “texts” such as YouTube videos, news articles, eulogies, and campaign press releases. These texts, though, are discursive fragments, best understood as part of a networked rhetoric. In this sense, the texts I examine are not complete, nor will they ever be so. They are complemented by other discourses, such as comment threads underneath the YouTube videos and news articles. I examine what some might describe as “context” for the main texts I analyze, but I would contend that this “context” is in fact part of the textual network, necessarily constituted together through the structure of the Web.

The subject material of this thesis lends itself to this kind of networked rhetoric. In this thesis, I investigate the rhetorical construction of digital identity. In online communication and scholarship thereof, the concept of “the [virtual] self” surfaces with great frequency.8 This topic, hearkening to ancient rhetorical concepts such as ethos, has become especially relevant in conversations about behavior in online settings.9 As people of all ages and most demographic categories continue to represent themselves online—be it through real names on Facebook, user names on Web forums, blog handles, video game avatars, or any other form—the ways members of society negotiate what constitutes identity, what online identities mean, and how they relate to the offline self will only continue to gain relevance. That relevance, of course, presupposes that such deliberations actually matter. In this way, I firmly agree with Warnick when she claims that “a good deal of vibrant and effective public discourse in the forms of social activism and resistance occur online, that such
discourse has had noticeable effects on society, and that it is therefore worthy of careful study by rhetoricians.”

These negotiations about the meaning of online identity are indeed worthy of investigation. Such deliberative conversations help to shape reality—a reality that greets people every time they open a Web browser or a mobile app, or otherwise engage each other through digital means.

Because identity is constituted and maintained through a wide variety of internal and external factors, it is especially useful to understand the development of networked rhetorical discourses about digital identity. The rhetorical construction of identity in cyberspace is distributed across many channels. One’s identity may be formed in relation to a variety of sites and services, ranging from the local newspaper’s comments section, to one’s identity on Facebook, to one’s video game avatar. Identity in these cases can be influenced by networks of communication and action, cohering together as the subject attempts to make sense of the world around her- or himself. These various identity markers may be compartmentalized by the subject, or they may all equally constitute his or her identity. I am not so much interested in these questions of how the identities are formed, however. I am most interested in how the discourses are formed—how digital identities and the meanings associated with them are discussed and negotiated through networked rhetorics. These discussions may not cease soon—in fact, they may never end, as long as the meaning of “identity” is not fixed. I am interested in understanding, then, how discussion and negotiation occur in time through rhetorical networks.

**Rhetorical Contexts of Negotiation**

Early promoters of what was described by some as “cyberutopia” believed that the Internet provided something of a safe haven for liberated performance of identities. Feminist scholars in particular saw
the development of the Internet as an opportunity to subvert many of society's gender norms. In this line of thinking, people online may make choices about gender and gender performance without feeling controlled by societal expectations and bodily norms. Without the appearance of sex and in the absence of corporeal cues for gender, people may perform gender without these and many other constraints. However, as online performances changed over time, scholars' visions of cyberutopia began to seem less realistic. More and more, studies showed that offline behaviors and expectations limited the emancipatory potential of the Web. Avatars replicated corporeal selves, assumptions about the “real world” carried over into the “virtual world,” and people became more comfortable sharing details of their offline lives on the Web, and vice versa. As a result, assumptions about privacy and anonymity on the Web have been called into question. The assertion that “it is simple in a digital environment to create multiple identities and to speak and write with a powerful sense of anonymity” is not always the case, notably in light of revelations about data security via the NSA and in the private sector.

In 2014, society seems to be witnessing what I call a convergence of online and offline identities, due in no small part to the proliferation of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, which ask us to associate our offline identities with virtual walls, news feeds, and hash tags. Zizi Papacharissi explains that new forms of technology tend to work on “principles of convergence, which enable multiple and overlapping connections between varieties of distinct social spheres.” While Papacharissi refers to technological structures, the same kind of thinking may apply to identities, since individuals perform within those social spheres. In such a framework, identities may converge through connections among different locations, notably between offline and virtual spheres. Much like the overlap of rhetorical networks on the Web, the overlap of various identities may press identities to converge on certain attributes, for example, one’s “real” name. This convergence in identities will likely demand more new terms for scholars to understand and explain fully how online and offline
selves interact, how they are shaped, and where boundaries lie among online and offline worlds and a constituted self. Members of society will need to negotiate its implications. The possibility that future political candidates will all be held responsible for their Facebook photos highlights a serious question about the meaning of online interactions. Beyond providing mountains of political dirt, the proliferation of data on the Web, especially data linked to offline, corporeal people, gives us an opportunity to reconsider how we calculate judgments about authority, ethos, character, or persona. While these questions are not entirely new, the introduction of multiple or fragmented selves in multiple “worlds,” dimensions, or levels of reality provides an exigent communicative context.

Imagining scenarios where online behavior has tangible impacts on offline selves is not a difficult endeavor. Already, one can point to myriad examples of students posting inappropriate photos on Facebook, employees insulting bosses on the Web, and people being jailed for committing crimes online. In these cases, it is clear that what people do online can have profound impacts on the offline world. Still, most of these cases have been relatively minor in scope, many of them conducted without deliberation from a large portion of society. In that grander sense, some cases of online identity impacting offline life have created serious, large-scale rhetorical negotiations of precisely what it means to perform identity in online and offline settings. Indeed, there are a few such cases able to provide flexibility and explanatory power about the rhetorical negotiation of online identity. I have chosen three cases, knowing that other examples, including the Steubenville rape case and the suicide of Aaron Swartz, might provide interesting additional cases. The three cases I have selected point to important social and political issues. The cases I will outline below provide insight into the construction, degradation, maintenance, and bolstering of ethos in local communities, state-level politics, and national-level foreign service. In total, this thesis will provide the opportunity to glimpse the rhetorical dynamics and effects of the interplay of online and offline identities.

The canonical theories of rhetoric are immensely valuable in understanding everyday
argumentative communication. Ancient and modern theories of rhetoric, ranging from \textit{ethos} to the rhetorical canons, have proven highly valuable in understanding modern communication, in sub-fields of presidential rhetoric, war rhetoric, literature, media, and even feminist rhetorical theory. I contend that these ancient theories and other theories of rhetoric can help explain in a novel fashion various phenomena in digital communication. It is difficult to foresee a world in which digital communication does not continue to spread across the globe, and spread quickly. This is a critical moment for rhetorical scholarship. If the discipline can help explain digital phenomena in a novel fashion, it might find renewed relevance in institutions and in a variety of publics. This thesis provides a unique perspective on growing trends in digital communication, helping explain the way online identity is treated rhetorically. Rather than merely explaining previous digital communication events, many of which fade in relevance within days or months, it is my hope that this thesis will illuminate the rhetorical processes of negotiation online and provide an intervention for re-shaping and re-directing discourse in various publics.

Two thousand fourteen and the near future may prove pivotal in the history and development of Internet culture and online identity. Anonymity and free expression are, at best, questionable elements of digital life; at worst, they are illusions for a now-defunct paradigm of digital living. And while U.S. citizens are still more worried about Facebook's data policies than they are about the NSA's policies, revelations about data collection have shaken many assumptions about the privacy of what people do on the Web.\textsuperscript{19} In some ways, it seems that \textit{ethos}, at least as perceived by others on the Web, is increasingly constituted by the aggregation of individual data. Whether this trend will continue into the future is unclear; however, one way or another, negotiation over a paradigm shift is likely. Thus, rhetorical critics are positioned to observe and understand how that future is being deliberated at this critical historical moment.
Scope and Organization

This thesis is designed to explore rhetorical negotiations concerning the distinctions and convergences between online identity and offline identity. A basic question of that rhetoric is this: to what extent does an online self (user name, handle, avatar, etc.) reflect the qualities of an offline, corporeal self, and vice versa? My goal here is not to create an explicit definition of identity, nor do I seek to answer any ontological questions about how online and offline identities are linked. Instead, I wish to explore rhetoric about the definitions of, and potential connections between, online and offline identity. This communication comes in various forms of rhetoric—notably, deliberative, forensic, and epideictic—providing a rich rhetorical foundation for the study.

The fundamental research question of the project asks how, if at all, are online and offline identities rhetorically constructed as separate? This central question seems simple, yet it presents a number of challenges. Necessarily, one must identify in the discourse what is defined as “online” and “offline” in terms of identity. With texts ranging from small forum posts to large press releases, such a task is perhaps not straightforward. Multiple authors exist, communicating in discussions, potentially changing and adding nuance to such definitions. In asking this question, I do not seek to put my finger on the zeitgeist of the U.S. populace. Such a claim would be difficult to make, even with extensive empirical work. Instead, I seek to understand how, in these cases, rhetoric is used to define and delimit notions of online and offline identity.

In this thesis, I conduct three rhetorical analyses, focusing on the negotiation of online and offline identity. These cases manifest various types of rhetoric exhibiting deliberative, forensic, and epideictic characteristics, thus setting familiar contexts for political discourse. Further, I use three theoretical frameworks or lenses to illuminate the rhetorical dimensions of each case.
Chapter 2: Points of Conversation and Contention

In each case I outline below, a few common points of debate emerge. These frames or *topoi* are not always consciously treated as such by those deliberating; however, the framework is useful for understanding these deliberative moments. The frames and *topoi* relate closely to a few theoretical issues in the field of rhetoric, providing room for criticism on each set of rhetorical texts. As a result, the cases facilitate a critical evaluation of these following theoretical issues in rhetoric.

First, in each case, deliberation considers questions of what is real and what is not real. This is a frequent *topos* in discourse about digital phenomena; for many, virtuality is suggestive of unreality. Drawing from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, I identify dimensions of the “Appearance-Reality Pair” in deliberation.21 In their treatment of this pair in *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that appearance/reality is a basic pair in philosophy, and that it is vital to reasoning about values.22 Considering appearance and reality in the context of these cases highlights the priorities and assumptions made about identity and deliberation thereof.

Next, a common point of contention in these cases is what constitutes the lines among “public” and “private” communication and spheres. The concept of “public” discourse is typically central to any definition of rhetoric. In these cases, we can observe questioning of the extent to which certain actions—say, comments made in *World of Warcraft* versus political comments made on a message board—engage the public or remain “private” in nature. Focusing in part on Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and theorizing by Jeff Weintraub, I highlight narratives about the development of various public spheres in relation to digital phenomena, consulting various conceptualizations of public and private life, including feminist theories of public performance.23

Finally, each case relates to questions of praise and blame. Though the deliberations have different ends, each asks the audience to praise or blame a particular identity in the given context. In
calling on judgments of praise and blame, the cases inevitably broach rhetorical issues of *ethos*, *persona*, and the performance of self. Because these cases grapple with rhetorical constructs of multiple identities—a subject not immediately apparent in ancient works—I dig into rhetorical treatises from Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* to understand how one might rhetorically praise or blame someone performing multiple identities.

**Chapter 3: When Worlds (of Warcraft) Collide**

This chapter explores the political campaign of Colleen Lachowicz, a candidate for Maine’s State Senate in November 2012. Lachowicz was attacked by the Maine Republican Party in part for her behavior in an online forum, *The Daily Kos*, where she wrote under the same handle as her *World of Warcraft* character, Santiaga. The state GOP used quotations from Lachowicz’s forum posts as well as images of Santiaga to frame Lachowicz as an unfit candidate. In its political context, and in a temporal sense, this scenario resembles deliberative rhetorical discourse. Citizens are asked to decide about a future set of policies, as guided by a particular representative in the State Senate. Texts for this chapter include the Maine Republican Party’s press release about Lachowicz, a mailer the state GOP sent to local voters, and an attack website, “Colleen’s World.” I analyze the texts to understand how online identity is rhetorically constructed to attack the offline *ethos* of a political opponent.

Embedded in this discourse is a clear message from the Maine GOP: Colleen Lachowicz lives in her own world, the *World of Warcraft*. You, the voter, live in the real world with us. Here is an obvious attempt to separate reality from appearance—what is not real. Lachowicz’s response, in line with a number of comments from various participants in the deliberations, critiques the actions as violating the expectation of privacy, both in the *World of Warcraft* and on *The Daily Kos*. The Maine GOP uses very traditional rhetorical tactics—press releases and attack mailers, as well as a website—to blame Lachowicz and portray her as unfit for office. The GOP targets her for spending a large amount
of time on the game and for making supposedly inappropriate comments online. In this context, the
three theoretical questions provide a strong framework for understanding the negotiation of identity in
light of this political battle.

Chapter 4: Mourning Vile Rat

The U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, was attacked in September 2012. Four U.S. diplomats were
killed in the attack, including Sean Smith, a U.S. Foreign Service member coordinating Information
Technology in the embassy. Following Smith's death, the community of the video game *EVE Online*
came together to mourn him, as he was a fellow player. In the game, Smith played under the avatar
“Vile Rat.” The community responded to Smith's death by mourning him as a diplomat in both the
offline world and in *EVE Online*. I first analyze the YouTube video eulogy made by the *EVE Online*
community for Sean Smith/Vile Rat. In addition, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a
eulogy for the diplomats killed in the Benghazi attack. In her eulogy for Sean Smith, she addressed his
diplomacy in both the offline world and in *EVE Online*, highlighting both identities as indicative of
Smith's character and importance to friends, family, and country. I analyze Clinton's eulogy to
understand how online identity and offline identity are connected to praise a subject.

Discussion of Smith’s identity, evident in the praise and blame in eulogies for him, is shaped
deeply by the theoretical frames and *topoi* presented in chapter two. First, appearance and reality are
negotiated in the discourse. In essence, that negotiation is handled by considering the extent to which
*EVE Online* plays out as a serious video game, one in which people must make deeply human and
deeply rhetorical decisions. The connection of *EVE Online* diplomacy and U.S. Foreign Service
diplomacy can thus be made by those who would seek to praise Smith. In addition, the distinction
between public and private life is handled in much a similar manner. By explicitly heralding Smith as a
public figure in *EVE Online*, those praising him are able to avoid complications of separating public
and private life. Even though he worked in “another world” as Hillary Clinton called it, his behavior was noble and served the public. The dimensions of praise and blame are particularly apparent in this situation, given the epideictic function of the eulogies for Smith.

Chapter 5: Revealing Snowden

In June 2012, Edward Snowden leaked information about the NSA's domestic intelligence program, code-named PRISM. He also detailed the inner workings of a larger scheme of domestic intelligence-gathering headed by the NSA. Snowden's leaks created an important moment for the discussion of national security and civil liberties. Following the release of Snowden's leaks, news website Ars Technica dug up information on Snowden, finding that he was in fact a member of the Ars Technica Web forums, associated with the articles published by the site. Under the name “TheTrueHOOHA,” he posted comments on the forums, discussing topics including government, politics, video games, and anime. Ars Technica first published an article about Snowden's digital identity on June 13, 2013. The first comment on that article, written by user “daropi,” opines, “This is a bit...creepy?” The comment thread, which spans some thirty-three pages and comprises about 1,300 comments, is a significant resource for observing discussions of online and offline identity. Users provide a variety of different perspectives, including concerns over public and private life, giving breadth and depth to the study of this artifact. Just under two weeks after the first article was published, Ars Technica published on June 26, 2013, yet another article on Snowden's past comments on the Ars Technica forum. That article received 556 comments, spanning another fourteen pages. I analyze in this chapter the Ars Technica articles and the comment threads for each.

The private/public pair is particularly important here. Snowden's past comments are framed by many commenters as private exhibitions. In that context, the arguments seem to indicate that it is highly inappropriate of Ars Technica to publish articles about his forum behaviors. Of course,
Snowden, having become something of a public figure, may, in some people's minds, transcend the
distinction of public and private communication. Appearance and reality are also relevant to this
situation, particularly as they relate to a supposed hypocrisy on the part of Snowden. In essence, the
question is about the ethos of Snowden: is he as heroic as some make him out to be? Or is he simply
an opportunist hiding behind the banner of justice? Finally, this discourse about Snowden comes at a
time when the U.S. government and people across the world are trying to decide how Snowden should
be judged—as a hero or a traitor. As is the case with both of the other examples, this set of texts calls
upon audiences to praise or blame the subject. But, unlike the other cases, Snowden is in the midst of
forensic processes. He may not be on trial, but he has sought asylum, lest he be extradited and almost
inevitably charged with criminal behavior in the United States. In this sense, rhetoric about Snowden's
past on *Ars Technica* serves within something of a larger forensic context.

**Chapter 6: Converging Rhetorics and Research Agendas**

The final chapter of this thesis serves to bring together the various theoretical lenses and cases of the
previous chapters. I observe that the cases examined in this thesis highlight networked rhetorics’ uses
of appearance/reality to create value systems and hierarchies. In particular, claims to “truth” arise as
vital in these discussions. Public/private, while immensely important, finds the most relevance in the
case of Edward Snowden. I provide observations on the current state of negotiations about online and
offline identity. These rhetorical dimensions will, of course, change over time; however, the work of
this thesis will serve as a foundation for future studies of rhetorical identity formation in digital
contexts. Essentially, while the objects of this study will become outdated rather quickly, the
theoretical underpinnings and their applications will likely remain relevant for some time to come. I
discuss the implications of choosing this moment for a study of rhetorical negotiations about identity
convergence—namely, that studying phenomena during crucial periods of change can provide future
scholars with records of moments of convergence. The structure and results of these cases may turn
out to foreshadow later deliberations about identity, rhetoric, and social values in networked, digital
contexts. I conclude with possible directions for the study of identity and networked and digital
communication in rhetorical criticism.
Notes


20. This situation might be re-framed as understanding vernacular voices, an important process even when polling data exists. Those voices, which I am investigating in part in this thesis, can highlight dissenting perspectives and flaws in polling data. For more, see: J. Michael Hogan, “Theory in the Ironic Mode: A Review of Hauser’s Vernacular Voices,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 215.


22. Ibid.

23. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformatoin of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category*


26. I use the term “pages” on a few occasions in this thesis. In forums and comment threads, a certain number of posts constitutes a “page,” before a user must click a button to go on to the next “page.” This limits vertical scrolling to a few times the size of the screen, preventing a user from having to scroll endlessly to view what can amount to many thousands of posts.

27. This sense of rhetoric resembles closely one of the senses described by Medhurst and Benson: “Rhetoric as the social values and effects of symbolic forms, whether intentional or not.” See: Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1984): XXI.
Chapter 2

Rhetorical Elements of Convergence, Conversation, and Contention

Each of the cases explored in this thesis contains traces of three distinct points of conversation or contention (*topoi*). Negotiations of what digital identity means, how it can be expressed, and how it should be treated are, at least in part, wrapped up in these topics. First, what is *real* about an identity or expression thereof, as compared to its *appearance*? Second, because each of these cases has elements of public service or performance—all of which are generally political in nature—central questions of the discourse ask what should be considered public information, what should be considered private information, and how that information should be disseminated. Finally, the networked rhetorics of each case seek to judge an individual in some fashion. Again, these negotiations are specifically political, asking audiences to engage the character of a potential lawmaker, the life of a fallen diplomat, and the past actions of a whistleblower. From a rhetorical perspective, these discourses give life to the question: how can one praise or blame an individual whose identity is expressed through both digital means and offline living? In total, the three theoretical elements provide significant breadth to the discussions surrounding the three similar yet distinct communicative events.

Those individuals participating in the discourses of the three cases answer these questions in radically different ways. This moment in history very well may be a turning point in the way questions about digital and offline identity are answered. Understanding the dynamics of these discussions, including the various lines of reasoning and argumentation embedded within, can illuminate the rhetorical features of broader social phenomena. To understand the various facets of these three theoretical concepts, I delve into the literature surrounding each rhetorical *topos*. I first explore literature concerning the appearance/reality pair, primarily as articulated by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. Next, I explore public/private pair literature, particularly focusing on various feminist
perspectives which developed over the second half of the twentieth century. I conclude by examining classical conceptions of rhetorical theory concerning praise and blame, focusing on Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

**Appearance/reality**

Dichotomies tend to be central parts of rhetorical processes. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, concerned with how people reason about values, discuss a number of dichotomies as guiding reasoning. They argue that perhaps the most basic dichotomy is that of appearance and reality; they explain, “We consider this dissociation (‘appearance-reality’) to be the prototype of all conceptual dissociation because of its widespread use and its basic importance in philosophy.”

Undoubtedly, a basic question of human existence is whether the things we experience, witness, observe, and do are, in fact, real. People tend to seek reality, to understand it and work within it to improve their lives. Popular culture suggests that, at least for many, the question is interesting and entertaining, in addition to being important in our everyday lives. Capitalizing on this interest, films like The Matrix and Fight Club very explicitly deal with questions of appearance and reality. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the exploration of appearance and reality in popular culture would likely demonstrate a renewed awareness of this fundamental philosophical question. Importantly, I would argue that, as basic as the question of appearance and reality is, individuals do not often dwell on—at least explicitly so—the reality of the coffee they drink in the morning on the way to work. Instead, often the question tends to arise when people engage in explicitly rhetorical situations: that politician must be lying about her motives; that cable company does not disclose its hidden fees, so the price you see in the commercial isn't real; he seems to be a nice guy, but he's really just trying to swindle you. In essence, people tend to be most concerned with appearance and reality when they judge, be it judgment of a person or judgment of an argument. Certainly, judgment of characters within this thesis reflects that tendency.
Most of the time, when discussing appearance and reality, there arise terms such as deception, lying, hiding, hidden, fake, and false. This likely stems from acknowledgment that reality exists, while appearances serve to obfuscate reality, to deflect and distract from the true. Of course, for some, appearance is reality. But for many, if not most, the dichotomy is basic in attempting to make sense of the world. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca posit that “When a stick is partly immersed in water, it seems curved when one looks at it and straight when one touches it, but in reality it cannot be both curved and straight. While appearances can be opposed to each other, reality is coherent: the effect of determining reality is to dissociate those appearances that are deceptive from those that correspond to reality.” Notice that the authors associate deception with appearance, and separate both from reality. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, appearances can be misleading, but they are not inherently so. “While appearance may correspond to and merge with reality, it may also lead us into error concerning it. As long as we have no reason to doubt it, appearance is simply the aspect under which reality is presented to us.” The appearance-reality pair, though, emerges only when appearance cannot be taken at face value as reflecting reality. Thus, at least in the rhetorical sense, appearance/reality is generally relevant only when some sort of deception or misrepresentation is present.

This sort of rhetorical process—of distinguishing appearance and reality in the face of potential deception, misrepresentation, or even simple disagreement about the real—has spurred much rhetorical scholarship. A helpful example to explore the initial dynamics of the appearance/reality pair might be Charles Morris' article “Pink Herring and the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic.” In the piece, Morris offers a re-reading of J. Edgar Hoover's tenure as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While some may have suspected at the time that Hoover was homosexual, appearance provided little reason for citizens to question his sexuality; as such, reality, as far as most understood it, was that Hoover was a “normal” heterosexual male. By the turn of the twenty-first century, though, new light had been brought to the situation. Hoover was likely in a relationship “with fellow bachelor
and Associate Director of the FBI Clyde Tolson.” For Morris, recognizing the reality of Hoover’s sexuality required a new exploration of the appearance Hoover put on. Morris' essay starts with a slightly different understanding of that appearance, calling attention to the clothes Hoover wore. Beyond just the clothes, Hoover did his best to “pass” as a heterosexual male, avoiding calling attention to his sexuality. Part of the passing involved a crusade against deviant sexuality, with Hoover hunting down homosexuals, perhaps with the goal of reinforcing his appearance as a heterosexual male. The “fourth persona” part of Morris' essay indicates Hoover's potential for addressing an audience in secret—a rhetorical “wink” of sorts—which allowed him to pass to most audiences while secretly acknowledging his position to other homosexuals. Taking stock of Morris' enterprise, the appearance/reality split should be apparent. Without any reason to question the reality of Hoover's sexuality, the appearance of his sexuality was likewise taken for granted. Once revelations of Hoover's homosexuality spread, people like Morris were able to revisit the rhetorical appearance presented at the time, pointing specifically to the deceptive nature of Hoover's rhetoric—his “pink herring” and communicating with the “fourth persona.” In spaces of uncertainty, then, the appearance/reality pair becomes rhetorically powerful.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca treat reality as a rule by which appearance is assessed, as a criterion which allows us to make judgments. For example, the idea of “fact-checking” political candidates assesses “reality” and compares politicians' rhetoric to that reality, creating a final evaluation or judgment of the veracity of each politician's statements. The Politifact website claims to do just that, with its slogan, “Sorting out the truth in politics.” Reality, for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, is a “construction” which allows us to classify the dimensions of appearance in hierarchical form. The emphasis on construction is vital. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not insist on a fixed, unchanging reality underlying everything; instead, they recognize that our realities are constructed. They note, “whereas appearance is given, reality is constructed, knowledge of it is indirect, sometimes
even impossible, and rarely capable of communication in an exhaustive and unquestionable manner.”

Still, that does not suggest that appearance is reality. In my reading of their propositions, I would interpret the establishment of “reality” as a process of social construction by which people come to agree on the basic principles or rules underlying everyday living. That still leaves room for a separate conception of appearance, wherein appearance is behavior that does not conform to the realities previously established through mutual negotiation.

The status of appearance and reality in digital phenomena is central to each of the cases in this thesis. Though the Internet has become part of the fabric of everyday life in the twenty-first century, society as a whole is only beginning to negotiate about the meaning of the digital life. Particularly in facing something of a generational gap in digital practices, it is not clear how people should interpret online behavior. What does it mean to “like” a Facebook page? Does it mean that the liker supports that particular cause or person, or that he/she simply wants to follow the page? This is just one very simple example. Myriad questions exist. The central question of this thesis, of course, is how we are rhetorically navigating the contours of negotiations about what online identity means. Fundamentally, that question is tied to the concept of reality. Because the reality of digital experiences remains an open question, particularly in relation to political contexts, scholars are able to witness those negotiations. In essence, I might rephrase the fundamental question of this thesis as: how is the reality of digital identity being judged? In this way, the appearance/reality pair allows understanding of both what is real and what is not real, at least in the eyes of those participating in these deliberations.

Reality rarely provides exact parameters for comparison with appearance. We might say, for example, that Barack Obama is a Democrat, but what does that tell us? For some, Obama is a socialist, but is the reality of identifying with the Democratic Party mutually exclusive with being a socialist? In that way, we might find difficult judging an appearance based on the parameters of reality, since the definition of being a Democrat is not precise. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write, “In actual fact
reality] is not always accompanied by a precise criterion that makes separation of the various aspects of [appearance] possible. Here they have made an interesting move. After explaining the possibility of using reality as a criterion for judging appearance, they make their own reality argument: “in actual fact.” In this case, it works as something of a reality check. Their theoretical thoughts must be grounded in the real. The main purpose, then, of establishing the criterion of reality is to create hierarchy. That hierarchy can then be deployed in a rhetorical fashion, allowing for argumentation based on the vertical structure of appearance and reality. This allows rhetors to communicate preferences for the real and to dismiss the deceitful or inaccurate. Thus, value is naturally established in the process of distinguishing the appearance/reality pair.

Our conceptions of reality highlight value systems more than they highlight unchanging, fixed, or ontological existences. “In [appearance], then, reality and value are closely linked. This conception is specially pronounced in all the constructions of the metaphysicians,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca go on to argue. Essentially, those who try to explain reality inevitably express their own preferences for the world. Metaphysicians are, of course, not alone in privileging the real in this way. For instance, politicians often use phrases like “the real issue is this,” or “we really must work together.” This kind of language expresses values more than anything else. Those values might be linked directly to appearance (eg. “we are not seeing the real issue because we are being deceived”) or as a direct expression of preference: (eg. “that issue is important, but the real [read: most important] issue is this”). Either way, we must grapple with the appearance/reality pair. When one establishes the hierarchy of reality and unreality, dismissal of the unreal becomes natural and easy. Rhetorically, appearance/reality is powerful because individuals privilege real experiences to those of mere appearance. By crafting something as a real experience, a rhetor wields the mechanisms of preference; by crafting something as unreal or deceitful, she wields the mechanisms of exclusion.

To grasp fully this process of valuation, let us consider the works of two critical theorists, Guy
Debord and Jean Baudrillard. Debord explains in *Society of the Spectacle* that “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”\(^{14}\) For Debord, the social experiences we have are not direct experience, but are instead diverted through mediation. Already we have a comparison of appearance and reality. “Direct living” would be real for Debord, whereas representation, allusion, distraction is the norm. He goes on to explain that when macro-level economies became central to social life, humans went from *being* to *having* as the primary goal of existence. Now we live in yet another era: “The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing.”\(^{15}\) Our goal in modern society is representation, because we project our perceived possession through representation. Value is again clear here. Reality is a lived experience, a direct feeling, whereas *spectacle* is fake, illusory. The economic forces of consumerism have driven us away from reality.

Debord’s work becomes particularly interesting when considering his explanation of the real. He explains, “For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings.”\(^{16}\) The spectacle’s primary purpose is self-preservation. Spectacle leads humans to fantasize not about uncharted paradises but about the very mediated world in front of them. In today’s society, something like Facebook represents the epitome of Debord’s spectacle: even when given the material ability to speak face-to-face with someone, many prefer the mediated, commodified interactions of digital walls and “like” buttons. Undoubtedly, Debord's valuation system here is of primary importance, more so even than his conceptualization of reality. In challenging the spectacle, the *unreal* spectacle, Debord calls upon the reader to place value outside systems of commodification and to challenge the spectacular world in which s/he lives. In challenging the hierarchies of “reality,” Debord thus creates his own reality and its own hierarchies. Such a move seems almost inevitable.

Jean Baudrillard’s interpretation of the “real” highlights a distinct perspective on appearance and reality. Baudrillard argues that all of society has moved from “real” lived experiences to
simulation. He marks four stages of society, crafted in relation to image: “[image] is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”

Thus, for Baudrillard, the images society has created over time have become self-serving and have created a simulation completely separate from any “reality” that might exist. Still, though, society continues forward with perceptions of the “real.” Baudrillard uses Disneyland as a primary example of simulacra and simulation. He posits, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation.”

Here Baudrillard points to an interesting appearance/reality function of something like Disneyland. In essence, Disneyland helps to structure our value system by contrasting itself with what is actually real. The lives we live outside the park gates are our reality. Our jobs, our families, and our possessions are what matters. For Baudrillard, his preferences come to bear on concepts of power. He declares, “We are no longer in the society of the spectacle, of which the situationists spoke,” arguing instead that an implosion of meaning has destroyed loci of power.

Baudrillard, in seeking to illuminate decentralized power and the simulation of society, creates a new hierarchy of simulation over real power. In essence, he has completely flipped the value system by redefining reality.

One more vital aspect of appearance/reality bears discussion here: the spatial dimensions of the appearance/reality pair. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca unfortunately do not discuss this topic. Instead, Fahnestock and Secor shed light on the concept. Spatially, people often conceptualize appearance as surface and reality as depth. They are implored to dig beyond the surface or dig deep to find the real meaning or the hidden meaning. Fahnestock and Secor declare, “The prevalence of the appearance/reality topos further suggests that we cannot discuss texts without using spatial metaphors. The very notion of appearance versus reality translates immediately into images of a surface with
something underneath, of solids that can be probed, of layers that can be peeled away to reveal deeper layers.” The spatial metaphors are especially interesting considering the function of identity. Often people will suggest that others put on masks or appearances different from their deep down, real personality or identity. The smooth talker is actually insecure. The clown is really depressed. Observers often think of peeling away layers of a person, as if cutting up an onion. We get to know them on a deeper level. This spatial concept of appearance/reality illustrates the structure of human beings in terms of appearance and reality. “Beauty,” the adage goes, “is only skin deep.” But who is to say, in fact, that the skin is any different from the heart (or, in biologically correct terms, the brain)?

The way individuals think about identity, especially in terms of appearance and reality, inevitably shapes how people talk about others. Spatial appearance/reality metaphors point to a number of assumptions: that there is a “real” identity; that people are multi-dimensional; that we can see different parts of people at different times. Judgment of others can absolutely rest on these questions.

In total, the appearance/reality pair often structures rhetorical exchanges and deliberations. In the cases of this thesis, appearance/reality is a vital and prevalent point of contention. In terms of the Internet itself, is digital engagement real? Does what individuals do online have any meaning? And if so, what is the meaning? The hierarchies placed on reality certainly shape the answers to these questions. Considering identity, especially of those individuals at the center of these deliberations, what do people consider real or genuine about the performance of those identities? Is the performance of a World of Warcraft character any less real than the performance of a politician on stage? Should one be held in any way less accountable for online performances if they are somehow less real than offline performances? Or, is everything situational? Finally, in the context of those deliberating the meaning of these identities, what does the discourse appear to say, versus what it really says? This final question is central to rhetorical criticism of these deliberations. Understanding what these scenarios can tell critics, beyond the surface level, is part of my enterprise here. In that way, I too am
creating (or at least reinforcing) a value system predicated on the principles of rhetorical criticism. These deliberations, then, should provide new depth to current literature on appearance and reality in rhetoric.

**Public/private living**

Each case in this thesis involves individuals participating in some sort of political activity. These activities include running for office, serving as a diplomat, and becoming a whistleblower for government activities. In each case, the individual serving in the political function has had online activity linked to his/her offline person (as bounded by a name). Importantly, though, none of the individuals were participating in a specifically political capacity when performing in those online contexts. Knowing that non-political activity is often considered “private” living, it is important that we consider the ways public and private activity are distinguished and discussed. Yet another dichotomy, public/private tends to have many of the same functions as does the appearance/reality pair. Craig Calhoun reminds us, “All attempts to render a single public discourse authoritative privilege certain topics, certain forms of speech, and certain speakers.”

Public/private can certainly be used to exclude certain discourses. The public/private pair likewise often involves judgment. It spurs questions like, “can we judge someone for what he or she does in private?” In modern political situations, there seems to be little distinction between public and private. Politicians must be able to keep secrets very well (and once again, appearance/reality crops up) or they will likely be judged for any given action they take at any point in time. Such has not always been the case. In the case of online activity, these kinds of negotiations are relatively new. And, despite current trends of blurring public and private activity in politics, these deliberations do include negotiations about what constitutes public and private living. As Karen Hansen puts it, “The boundaries of the public, private, market, and social realms are not absolute; they shift depending on historical period and situational context.”
Jeff Weintraub provides a helpful analysis of the basic distinctions between public and private. He first explains two conceptual frameworks: “What is hidden or withdrawn versus what is open, revealed, or accessible” and “What is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals.” These two potential definitions of public and private are informative, but perhaps not as nuanced as one might desire. Weintraub provides that nuance later by outlining four main distinctions by which people separate public and private activity. Three of those distinctions are especially valuable for this analysis. First, Weintraub details “The liberal-economistic model, dominant in most ‘public policy’ analysis and in a great deal of everyday legal and political debate, which sees the public/private distinction primarily in terms of the distinction between state administration and the market economy.” To put it another way, “the state is presumed to operate in the public interest, while economic actors pursue their own ‘private’ interests as calculating individuals or profit-maximizing corporations.” This distinction is certainly interesting. On one hand, we have state activity, or perhaps more generally, political activity through institutionalized means. On the other hand, an individual's actions outside that context, including consumer decisions, classify as private actions. This lens provides great specificity to what “public” means, much more than the other models. That specificity comes at the sake of specificity in terms of “private” action. In this case, because so much would be classified as “private,” the model may require further specification to delineate among certain types of private action.

Weintraub's second model simultaneously expands and contracts that liberal-economistic model. He details the “republican-virtue (and classical) approach, which sees the ‘public’ realm in terms of political community and citizenship, analytically distinct from both the market and the administrative state.” This second model is likely familiar to rhetorical scholars. This model tends to resemble the model of the public sphere as advanced by Habermas, as well as many others. Habermas explains the public sphere as having seven potential qualities: first, when events or occasions are “open
to all,” being inclusive instead of exclusive. Public may also refer to “common,” as in “promoting the public or common welfare.” Third, it might suggest “official;” fourth, as associated with reputation or prestige (when someone has a “public reputation”). It may also be associated with carrying “public opinion” or attracting the attention of the “public” via publicity (as in mass media). Finally, Habermas dichotomizes the public sphere, which is concerned with freedom and permanence, with the private sphere, which is seen as dealing with the “procurement of [life’s] necessities.” Habermas’ grand vision is of a public sphere in which citizens can work together to deliberate about issues important to society. The model is most deeply concerned with deliberation and discussion. When we engage in discussion about politics, we enter that public sphere. Sheller and Urry explain, “The private sphere is seen as part of civil society from which potential solidarity, equality and public participation can arise. Thus inclusion or exclusion from the public sphere occurs through the self-organization of social actors into associations that can act publicly or speak as the ‘private citizens come together as a public’.” Calhoun also details the Habermasian ideal: “it is based (a) on a notion of public good as distinct from private interest, (b) on social institutions (like private property) … and (c) on forms of private life (notably families) that prepare individuals to act as autonomous, rational-critical subjects in the public sphere.”

There are many elements at play in this second model. Weintraub connects the model to ancient thinking. He details two visions of the public from antiquity. First, “The self-governing polis or republic (res publica, literally “public thing”), from which we inherit a notion of politics as citizenship, in which individuals, in their capacity as citizens, participate in an ongoing process of conscious collective self-determination.” This is the kind of Greek model, placing the polis at the center of the public life. Goings-on in the home world (oikos) are separate from the public sphere. Privacy thus is defined, at least in this case, in part by the presence of action in the domestic realm. Second, from “The Roman Empire, from which we get the notion of sovereignty: of a centralized, unified, and
omnipotent apparatus of rule which stands above the society and governs it through the enactment and administration of laws. The 'public' power of the sovereign rules over, and in principle on behalf of, a society of 'private' and politically passive individuals who are bearers of rights granted to them and guaranteed by the sovereign.”

The second origin story provides a stark contrast to the first. Instead of privacy being defined by a kind of personal being, privacy is actually defined by a lack of power. Because the empire rules, individuals are relegated to the home, where their actions presumably are not of importance. Thus, in a democratic or republican society, individual agency plays a much greater role in determining the distinction between public and private. A complicating factor here is that we increasingly tend to view a public community, in which our actions, even when not explicitly political, are important to the public sphere. Weintraub details, “the practice of citizenship is inseparable from active participation—direct or mediated—in a decision-making community maintained by solidarity and the exercise of (what used to be called) republican virtue.”

The framework of public sphere and citizenship thus is not fixed. It can be expanded to include various acts beyond the overtly political, or it can be narrowed to very specific kinds of political discussions. For example, Berlant and Warner explain that the modern fetishization of “family values” has necessitated “privatization of citizenship and sex,” and that as a result vital issues have been pushed out of the public eye.

The third model created by Weintraub on which I wish to focus is based on questions of feminism. Weintraub defines it as “A tendency, which has become important in many branches of feminist analysis, to conceive of the distinction between 'private' and 'public' in terms of the distinction between the family and the larger economic and political order—with the market economy often becoming the paradigmatic 'public' realm.” Feminist concerns about the public/private dichotomy are particularly rich, providing a strong foundation for understanding the deliberation surrounding each case in this thesis. While not all feminist distinctions concern themselves with “family” per se, Weintraub's basic explanation will suffice for now. In general, feminist traditions have called into
question the utility of the public/private dichotomy, though that perspective is certainly not universal. The original rallying cry was, “the personal is political,” which we could conceivably rephrase as “the private is public.”\textsuperscript{41} Critiques might suggest that “the 'personal is political' in part because private institutions such as families often operate, like the polity, through conflict, power hierarchies, and violence.”\textsuperscript{42} These critiques largely developed in the midst of and aftermath of second wave feminism. Stressing the importance of women—who were largely relegated to the “domestic” sphere—became much more possible by attacking the contested distinction between public and private life.

Understanding and critiquing the public/private dichotomy is central to feminist thinking. Jean Cohen remarks eloquently,

From its inception, feminist politics has targeted the legal disabilities and discriminatory laws that excluded women from the “public” spheres of work and politics . . . By now the main charges should be familiar: despite its obvious inadequacy to capture the institutional complexity of modern civil societies, a dichotomous conception of the social structure as divided into a “public” and a “private” sphere . . . has played a key role in ideologies justifying both the exclusion of women from full membership in the political community and the denial of equality of opportunity in economic life.\textsuperscript{43}

The notion of domesticity, reaching all the way back to ancient Greece, where women tended to the home (\textit{oikos}, which later formed the root for the word “economy”), continued into the twentieth century. Women were confined to the home—to the private sphere—while men engaged in the public, political sphere. When women did participate in the public sphere, all too often (but not always) they were still subordinate to men. Men certainly sought to keep this order, at least until recently. We might think about it in this way: “The public world and the public/private dichotomy have historically been established and defined by men. As Arendt notes without irony, the public world \textit{could} only be established because the private . . . realm of necessity was sustained by women and slaves.”\textsuperscript{44}
Ultimately, the rules of order and power were written by those in the “public” sphere, serving an exclusionary function for those in the “private” sphere. Feminist critiques, then, saw the public/private distinction as an artifact of hegemonic masculine power. Frances Olsen remarks, “One of the main things a power-holder gains from successfully characterizing his power as 'private' is a degree of legitimacy and immunity from attack. Thus, it is predictable that people will try to characterize their use of power as 'private' and to characterize power deployed against them as 'not private'-that is, as public, oppressive, unjustified and unconstitutional.” For feminists, then, attacking that structure makes much sense.

Feminist thinking was put in a difficult situation with the verdict in the famous court case _Roe v. Wade_. In that case, the court ruled that abortion was legal on grounds of privacy. The legality of abortion was a victory for feminists, no doubt, but the justification for the decision could certainly put feminists at unease. Catherine MacKinnon levies a powerful critique against the _Roe v. Wade_ decision, explaining, “the legal concept of privacy can and has shielded the place of battery, marital rape, and women's exploited labor.” For feminists who sought to blur the line between public and private, the _Roe v. Wade_ decision created something of a double-bind. The near-absolute sanctity of privacy can certainly create problems for those who might experience inequality, discrimination, or violence in the private realm. Thus, a number of feminist writers have called for a re-articulation of privacy wherein “women's subordination must be addressed in part through the reconceptualization of privacy to ensure women's sexual autonomy relative to men.” In the case of Tracy Higgins, she even calls for a revival of the public/private distinction, framed in a way casting skepticism on both public and private power. In the end, such a perspective would at least provide a language for articulating injustices committed against women and minorities.

Yet another complication arose from the attacks on the public/private distinction. The attitude that “the personal is political” subjected individual identities to politicization. In essence, the very act
of being became a political performance for many women and minorities. Jean Bethke Elshtain points out, “everything gets construed as 'political' because the boundaries of politics and privacy are blurred . . . Intimate life is pervaded by politics; private life becomes a recommendation or authentication of one's political stance.”48 For some, this is not a problem. For others, though, this brand of “identity politics” raised the stakes for everyday living to the point of discomfort. Elshtain continues, “One dimension of this dangerous game of ontic politics is that persons are more and more judged not by what they do or say but by what they presumably are. . . . Those who disagree with one's 'politics,' then, become enemies of one's identity.”49 Perhaps Elshtain exaggerates somewhat her claims that everything will eventually boil down to one's identity. Still, though, for minority voices, identity politics can be difficult territory. The prevalence of the “race card” dismissal of argumentation highlights such a conundrum. While one's identity is undoubtedly vital to every moment of political engagement, putting all of one's eggs into one basket, so to speak, makes dismissal quite possible without sufficient political clout. In total, the demands of constant political performance and the dangers of dismissal call into question the wisdom of completely erasing boundaries between public and private action. As we will see in the cases of this thesis, that danger pervades deliberation about digital and offline identities.

A final important aspect of public/private is specifically related to digital and offline activity. The meaning of public and private continues to shift with changing communications technologies. Recent revelations about NSA spying activity highlight the extent to which online communications can be intercepted, monitored, and acted upon. Still, individual users seem to value privacy, particularly from government interference. Clearly, “As intentional and unintentional surveillance becomes more commonplace in contemporary society, people will likely continue to seek ways to carve out privacy in highly visible media environments.”50 Given the pervasiveness of the information society, though, our desire to receive and provide information often comes at the cost of respecting conventional concepts
of privacy. One might fairly argue that on the Web, nearly everything is inevitably a public activity. Debora Halbert even expresses online privacy as something of a paradox, describing “one of the most interesting aspects about privacy in the virtual world and the hybrid of virtuality within which we all find ourselves — that in virtual worlds, there is by definition no privacy. Any computer–based connection relies upon information to construct its reality and this information is thus open to view by others, both public and private agents.”

Halbert's argument is, if nothing else, quite thought-provoking. In participating in online activities, must we shed all expectations of privacy? Given that any notion of privacy was abandoned entirely by at least some parties in each of the three cases, privacy seems to be potentially an unrealistic paradigm for virtual communication. Perhaps, as Halbert concludes, “privacy in these spaces is an antiquated concept and one is left to live life in full view of others.” Given the nature of deliberation in the cases, though, widespread assent to such a notion will be quite difficult to accomplish.

Papacharissi, in contrast, argues that the Internet may provide a new kind of public engagement. She writes, "Online technologies afford us spaces, public and private, rather than a public sphere. These spaces accommodate a new kind of publicity and privacy, constructed via the amalgamation of private and public interests." She contends that "Spaces presented by convergent technologies are hybrid public and private spaces." In essence, the nature of the Internet no longer demands the mutual exclusivity of public and private. Instead, spaces on the Web provide opportunities for both public and private engagement, sometimes simultaneously. Facebook serves as an excellent example: with a simple change of settings for a post to one's timeline, a post might reach a small circle of friends or a wide circle of people through what Facebook calls a "public" post. The hybridity of such spaces can muddle the picture of the public/private topos, potentially confusing individuals as both exist simultaneously.

The various frameworks of privacy could easily constitute an entire thesis or dissertation. Legal
perspectives, social perspectives, political perspectives, and others could potentially be relevant to determining the nature of privacy. In the case of this thesis, however, I seek to understand how discourses of privacy arise in the context of digital identity negotiation. Given that most of the deliberative participants are likely unfamiliar with the works of Habermas and philosophical treatises on privacy, understanding here the general lines of reasoning about privacy should suffice. The participants may be informed by notions of privacy as interpreted in the U.S. Constitution (via court decisions including Roe v. Wade) or the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, but their understanding of such documents is certainly filtered through general lines of reasoning. Because feminist perspectives on privacy have moved beyond the academy and into public discourse, it is quite plausible that deliberative participants will be well aware of the potential implications of the public/private dichotomy. In the context of the digital revolution, though, one might expect a different shape to the discussion of the public/private pair. These cases, then, will reflect not only the dynamics of the previous literature mentioned here; indeed, the cases will contribute to a new understanding of the public/private dichotomy in the information age.

**Rhetorical masks: praise and blame**

Each case involves the rhetorical processes of praise and blame. Under classical thinking, praise and blame fell under epideictic genres of discourse, but the nature of these cases seems to span the three classical genres (deliberative in the sense of an election, forensic in the sense of determining guilt of Snowden, and epideictic in the eulogizing of Sean Smith/Vile Rat). The dynamics of praise and blame, though, are relatively simple. Particularly in classical texts, praise and blame is fairly formulaic. Studying specifically the processes of praise and blame might be fruitful to some extent, but rhetorical theory might have more to offer these cases beyond the mechanics of praise and blame. Indeed, the performance of multiple or fragmented identities, while certainly accelerated by digital technologies, is
not an entirely new phenomenon. I thus investigate the ways we might praise and blame characters complicated by complex, fragmented, or multiple identity markers. Given that this thesis is explicitly a study in rhetorical processes, I seek to combine ancient rhetorical theories of ethos, persona, praise, and blame with my understanding of the appearance/reality and public/private frames.

Ancient rhetorical theory was notably concerned with the substance of the speaker. Various authors attempted to get at what constituted the substance of the speaker, either from the perspective of performance or from the perspective of an audience taking in rhetoric. Terms like ethos and persona can be found in ancient treatises of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the unknown author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium. Character likewise surfaces in ancient treatises, suggesting that, at least in some cases, ethos and persona are related to a central “character” of a speaker. Pertinent for these authors are distinctions between good and evil, just and wicked, and honesty and deceit (or, essentially, appearance and reality). The good man—note, too, the gendered implication for rhetoric—will use the power of oratory for honorable and just purposes. The speaker's character is of the utmost importance, but so too for each of these authors is the character of the audience, of the state, and of the object of oratory. Epideictic or panegyric speaking, then, must assess and communicate the character of a person as worthy of praise or blame. Many ancient authors seem to view character as a monolithic, perhaps unchanging part of one's existence. At first glance, there appears to be little room for questions of multiple or fragmented characters or identities, instead pointing to a single character speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken of. In considering the utility of rhetorical theory for explaining contemporary rhetorical phenomena, such a view might seem especially antiquated. In the digital age, scholars increasingly argue that each person's identity is expressed in different ways under different circumstances, perhaps creating a multiplicity of personal identities performed at various times.\textsuperscript{54} How could ancient rhetorical theory account for such developments of the digital age?

As is often the case, ancient texts are more flexible here than first glance might suggest; or, at
least, the texts are ambiguous enough in the context of the speaker’s substance to allow multiple readings, complete with potential explanations of multiple or fragmented identities. The most promising route for understanding multiple identities in ancient theory seems to be the exploration of drama in rhetorical theorizing. Latent in much contemporary understanding of identity is the concept of performance. The notion of performing identities in different contexts matches closely the notions of drama, with actors taking on different roles, depending on factors of production, scene, and time. Ancient theorists often discussed poetry and drama, although at times with a tone suggesting denigration of both arts, at least compared to rhetoric. In exploring ancient notions of actors, acting, \textit{ethos, persona,} and character, there is much room for interpretation as to the substance of the self. In the crevices of meaning, we can observe a more nuanced understanding throughout the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the unknown author of the \textit{Rhetorica ad Herennium.}

Aristotle, unsurprisingly for the rhetorical critic, presents an intriguing starting point for analysis. His conceptualization of \textit{ethos} has pervaded the development of rhetorical theory in a variety of ways. Cherry sums up Aristotle’s \textit{ethos}, noting, “Ethos refers to the need for rhetors to portray themselves in their speeches as having a good moral character, ‘practical wisdom’ [\textit{phronesis}], and a concern for the audience in order to achieve credibility and thereby secure persuasion.”\textsuperscript{55} Miller points to Aristotle’s distinction between \textit{ethos} and \textit{e ethos}, roughly translating to “habit” and “character,” respectively.\textsuperscript{56} The speaker could best show his or her character (\textit{e ethos}) to the audience by demonstrating good habits (\textit{ethos}), through taking “precaution to avoid excess and deficiency” in speech.\textsuperscript{57} For Aristotle, as a rhetorical device, (\textit{e})\textit{ethos} was performed in the speech. Kennedy translates Aristotle as claiming, “[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence.”\textsuperscript{58} In the \textit{Rhetoric, ethos} is solidified as a central mode of persuasion or proof. Thinking of \textit{ethos} as a mode of proof is helpful: in the speech, the rhetor must take the opportunity to \textit{prove} his or her character, usually by practicing the best habits of
speech. *Ethos,* then, is situational in the *Rhetoric,* as opposed to being a stable category of underlying character. *Phronesis* (practical wisdom) or *arête* (virtue) might get to the underlying “character” of a speaker, but for rhetorical purposes, *ethos* is central.\(^5^9\) Aristotle’s ancient Greek view of *ethos* provides an important contrast to later authors including Cicero and Quintilian, who focus on the idea of the *vir bonus* and the underlying character of the speaker.

As Cherry remarks, “Aristotle’s concept of *ethos* has not been passed down unchanged through the history of rhetoric.”\(^6^0\) Cicero, he notes, “does not use the term *ethos,*” only coming close to it in a discussion of *ethikon,* perhaps translated as “ethical;” Cicero defines *ethikon* as “courteous and agreeable, adapted to win good-will.”\(^6^1\) Further, Cicero’s notion of *lenitas* relates to *ethikon,* explained as “a restrained style that helps to make apparent an orator’s moral character.”\(^6^2\) These concepts may somewhat resemble Aristotle’s notion of *ethos,* but Cicero does not dwell on them. Instead, in most of his writings, particularly in *De Officiis,* Cicero focuses on *persona,* a term generally considered outside the bounds of rhetoric, reserved instead for literature or drama. Elliott explains, “*persona* refers originally to a device of transformation and concealment on the theatrical stage.”\(^6^3\) *Persona* often makes reference to masks, for example, the masks one might wear while acting in a performance. The notions of concealment and masks are notable because of their relationship to appearance and reality. Masks create appearances, concealing or hiding the reality of the person underneath. *Ethos* as demonstrated in rhetoric, on the other hand, is not so much concerned with obfuscating the underlying reality as it is concerned with communicating transparently that reality. Given the many critiques throughout history of rhetoric as only concerned with appearance and falsehoods, this notion of *ethos* stands out. However, Cicero’s notion of *persona* may not be as separate as it immediately appears from the underlying reality of a person. By reconciling Cicero’s notions of goodness and the rhetor’s virtue with *persona,* it is possible to better understand the rhetorical dynamics of praise and blame as combined with multiple performances.
In the works of Cicero there are a number of references to character, identity, and acting. Michele Kennerly focuses on Cicero's work *De Officiis* in an effort to explore early dramatistic theory, as an ancient precursor to the likes of Kenneth Burke and theorists of the first, second, third, and fourth *personae*. Ancient theory, she explains, likewise offered four *personae*: “It was amid [the] ancient rhetorical-theatrical dynamic that Stoicism’s dramatism took form, its center stage occupied by four *personae* that a person must negotiate so as to choose, speak, and live appropriately and according to nature.” Digging into Cicero's explication of *persona* theory, the four levels provide richness for rhetorical study. Cicero first writes, “we are invested by Nature with two characters, as it were: one of these is universal, arising from the fact of our being all alike endowed with reason and with that superiority which lifts us above the brute. From this all morality and propriety are derived, and upon it depends the rational method of ascertaining our duty.” This first level indicates a basic ability to think rationally and draw moral principles. Essentially, Cicero seems to be arguing that we must first and foremost perform our duties as human beings, deriving those duties from rational thought. These duties might likely include adherence to principles of justice and honor, taking care to solve problems through persuasion instead of force. He goes on to note, “The other character is the one that is assigned to individuals in particular. In the matter of physical endowment there are great differences; some, we see, excel in speed for the race, others in strength for wrestling; so in point of personal appearance, some have stateliness, others comeliness. Diversities of character are greater still.” In this explanation, Cicero points to the conception of personal nature, suggesting that each person has particular skills guiding his or her choice of role in society. The diversities of character likely provide breadth needed for different roles in society, ensuring that each duty is fulfilled.

He likewise goes on to add two more characters. He remarks, “To the two above-mentioned characters is added a third, which some chance or some circumstance imposes, and a fourth also, which we assume by our own deliberate choice. Regal powers and military commands, nobility of birth and
political office, wealth and influence, and their opposites depend upon chance and are, therefore, controlled by circumstances.”

As such, while human nature and personal nature demand particular duties and roles, circumstances and chance may then refine those duties and roles. Cicero himself embodied this kind of being: by “nature” a statesman, he changed his role in exile to stately writing instead of direct political engagement. This, of course, does not leave the individual without choice, choice being vital to early philosophers and rhetorical theorists. He offers, “But what role we ourselves may choose to sustain is decided by our own free choice. And so some turn to philosophy, others to the civil law, and still others to oratory, while in case of the virtues themselves one man prefers to excel in one, another in another.” In total, one might choose his or her profession, but that choice will be constrained by circumstances and chance, one's personal nature, and one's human duty.

Cicero's relatively novel theory of character, emphasizing roles and duties, provides an interesting direction for rhetorical thought. In this conception, human roles are not entirely pre-destined, though there is a certain nature to which each of us must adhere. Interestingly, neither is it the case that one should just “be oneself” and ignore the feedback of others. Cicero proclaims, “For, as painters and sculptors and even poets, too, wish to have their works reviewed by the public, in order that, if any point is generally criticized, it may be improved; and as they try to discover both by themselves and with the help of others what is wrong in their work; so through consulting the judgment of others we find that there are many things to be done and left undone, to be altered and improved.”

Character seems at once stable and changing. Though our choices are narrowed by personal nature, each person still must narrow beyond that nature to choose his or her roles in society. If that role is not being performed appropriately and in accordance with the sensibilities of society, one should, in Cicero's mind, change. Comparing character to artists provides an interesting analogy, likening our daily performances to those on a stage, on a canvas, or written in poetry. Identity essentially becomes a work of art to be appreciated by the rest of society. In this sense, the use of multiple roles (or what we
might call multiple identities) to embody one's nature might not seem too far a stretch. In any case, the performance and perception of character is something of a rhetorical negotiation, as opposed to a completely stable, inherent trait.

In further explaining the natural roles we might assume, Cicero highlights the principle of consistency. He first observes, “to us Nature has assigned the roles of steadfastness, temperance, self-control, and considerateness of others; Nature also teaches us not to be careless in our behaviour towards our fellow-men. Hence we may clearly see how wide is the application not only of that propriety which is essential to moral rectitude in general, but also of the special propriety which is displayed in each particular subdivision of virtue.” And, nature is vital. Cicero’s preoccupation with traits of temperance and self-control reiterates his concern with setting humans apart from animals. More than that, though, it essentially lays down the rules for the stage. To be consistent in these principles is to be virtuous in whatever roles we might take up. He explains, “In this way I think we shall have a fairly clear view of our duties when the question arises what is proper and what is appropriate to each character, circumstance, and age. But there is nothing so essentially proper as to maintain consistency in the performance of every act and in the conception of every plan.” The statement comes to something like this: we are perfectly capable of working out what our duties should be based on our personal characteristics and our circumstances, but even if we cannot work out those duties, we must at least be consistent in our performances.

In *De Oratore*, Cicero devotes a brief few moments to the discussion of role internalization, much in the vein of drama. In that section, he recognizes the need for orators to become impassioned and at one with the roles they play. Even in an obviously fake setting, theater is immensely powerful:

But, as I said, that this may not appear surprising in us, what can be more fictitious than poetry, than theatrical representations, than the argument of a play? Yet on the stage I myself have often observed the eyes of the actor, through his mask, appear inflamed with
fury while he was repeating these verses,

“Have you, then, dared to separate him from you,

Or enter Salamis without your brother?

And dreaded not your father's countenance?”

The imagery of the mask again crops up in this section. Always associated with the theater, Cicero seems to argue here that the mask is not merely a mask, that the actor is not merely acting, but instead channeling the power of the character, perhaps in part becoming the character in a quite literal sense. Good actors, of course, are convincing in their performances. In this case, being convincing is possible through the genuine connection of actor and character. This might in fact be necessary for becoming a successful actor. Cicero seems to imply such is the case in his comparison between actors and writers: “And if even the player who pronounced these verses every day could not yet pronounce them efficiently without a feeling of real grief, can you suppose that Pacuvius, when he wrote them, was in a cool and tranquil state of mind? Such could not be the case; for I have often heard that no man can be a good poet (as they say is left recorded in the writings of both Democritus and Plato) without ardor of imagination, and the excitement of something similar to phrensy.” For the poet and the actor, taking up another role is a virtue. Successful use of persona can point to one’s virtuous underlying character. The mask can become transparent long enough to see the truth underneath, much like a speaker’s performance of ethos (as habit) might make transparent his or her e ethos (character). Demonstrating talent and imagination, dedication to these fictional situations would be a personal role the poet or actor has chosen to take up, in accordance with the fourth premise of Cicero's personae. In such a way, using his or her presumably natural talent for taking on multiple roles is admirable.

What, though, of the orator? Are actors and poets the only ones justified in taking on multiple roles? Cicero does not fail to enlighten us. “Do not therefore imagine that I, who had no desire to imitate or represent the calamities or fictitious sorrows of the heroes of antiquity in my speech, and was
no actor of a foreign and personated part, but a supporter of my own, when Manius Aquilius, by my
efforts, was to be maintained in his rights as a citizen, did that which I did in the peroration of that
cause, without a strong feeling.” Cicero was not
imitating, be it imitation of real or fictitious persons; yet, he still took on a “strong feeling” of
connection. For Cicero, then, we might take on roles to the extent that we remain true to our nature,
stopping short of imitation in most cases, aside from actors and poets.

Quintilian later takes up the same question, supplementing and augmenting Cicero’s position.
He first advances a similar position to Cicero regarding the power of acting, describing, “I have often
seen actors, both in tragedy and comedy, leave the theatre still drowned in tears after concluding the
performance of some moving role. But if the mere delivery of words written by another has the power
to set our souls on fire with fictitious emotions, what will the orator do whose duty it is to picture to
himself the facts and who has it in his power to feel the same emotion as his client whose interests are
at stake?” Clearly, acting is incredibly powerful in the same way Cicero described. In Quintilian’s
eyes, though, taking on roles is central to the enterprise of rhetorical training. He explains, “In the case
of declaimers indeed it is of the first importance that they should consider what best suits each
character: for they rarely play the role of advocates in their declamations. As a rule they impersonate
sons, parents, rich men, old men, gentle or harsh of temper, misers, superstitious persons, cowards and
mockers, so that hardly even comic actors have to assume more numerous roles in their performances
on the stage than these in their declamations.” In learning to be an exceptional speaker, one might
take up declamation and thus, to some extent, the enterprise of an actor. This sort of impersonation is
surely not immoral or inappropriate. Instead, befitting the goals of an orator, taking on multiple roles
can be virtuous.

For orators, adopting the role of another person who is part of the rhetorical process can be
valuable. Assuming the role of judge might be useful. So, too, might assuming the role of an opponent
in the court room. For Quintilian, these acts are helpful in advancing one's rhetorical goals. He states, “For just as doctors have to do more than treat the ailments which meet the eye, and need also to discover those which he hid, since their patients often conceal the truth, so the advocate must look out for more points than his client discloses to him. After he considers that he has given a sufficiently patient hearing to the latter's statements, he must assume another character and adopt the role of his opponent, urging every conceivable objection that a discussion of the kind which we are considering may permit.” A good orator, then, would be able to understand and imitate others, particularly opposing advocates or judges. That virtue would certainly be something to celebrate, as an extension of the person's core nature. The good orator, the good man, would search for the truth and the best way to persuade an audience. As a prime example of that good orator, Quintilian offers up Cicero himself:

At times, like Cicero in his defence of Rabirius Postumus, he will pretend that he himself is strongly moved, in order to win the ear of the judge and to give the impression of one who is absolutely convinced of the truth of his cause, that so his statements may find all the readier credence whether he defends or denies the actions attributed to his client. Consequently it is of the first importance, wherever the alternative is open to us, to consider whether we are to adopt the character of a party to the suit or of an advocate.

In total, the orator can and should convincingly take on multiple roles, but only insofar as those roles do not conflict with the person's nature.

Orators, like actors and poets, can extend themselves into different roles. Quintilian and Cicero seem to suggest that the variety of roles orators should take on is narrower than those of actors and poets, as it would be improper to adopt a role not in keeping with the orator's natural character. In many cases, though, the adoption of multiple roles would be wise and proper, demonstrating a variety of traits and abilities. In all of the cases, praise of such a person would be anchored in the individual's conventional identity—for example, Cicero the Statesman.
Coming from the tradition of epideictic speaking formalized by Aristotle, Cicero and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* write at length of giving praise and blame as part of the epideictic process. Cicero divides the concerns of praise and blame into three main categories: the mind, the body, and circumstances.\(^8^0\) Traits of the mind primarily involve honor, appropriateness, and virtue. He explains, “The virtues of the body are health, beauty, strength, speed. Extraneous virtues are public office, money, connexions by marriage, high birth, friends, country, power, and all other things that are understood to belong to this class. And the principle ought to apply to these which applies everywhere; the opposites of these qualities and their nature will be apparent.”\(^8^1\) In praising a person, then, each of the three categories might be employed. Remarks in each of these categories might be observed in almost any funeral oration from the ancient Greeks to today. Still, Cicero remains convinced that praise of the mind is the most powerful. He declares, “in praise and censure it will be necessary to observe not so much what the subject of the speech possessed in bodily endowment or in extraneous goods as what use he made of them. For it is foolish to praise one's good fortune and arrogant to censure it, but praise of a man's mind is honourable and censure of it very effective.”\(^8^2\) Virtues resulting from birth, luck, or circumstance are not as important as the person's mind, the central faculty responsible for capitalizing on fortune and circumstance. Here one's intellect and thinking capabilities are of the utmost importance. Again, Cicero focuses on the fourth level of the personae theory, that of making decisions. Honor, virtue, and justice exacted through one's choices—likely regardless of the role in which one finds oneself—are the litmus test for choosing to praise or blame.

In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the author goes into even further detail on each of these principles. The author lays out the categories of external circumstances, physical attributes, and qualities of character, providing short lists of terms associated with each category.\(^8^3\) He or she then goes on to create a list of questions to pinpoint the person's character: “Has he been rich or poor? What kinds of power has he wielded? What have been his titles to fame? What his friendships? Or what his
private feuds, and what act of bravery has he performed in conducting these feuds? With what motive has he entered into feuds? With what loyalty, goodwill, and sense of duty has he conducted his friendships? What character of man has he been in wealth, or in poverty? What has been his attitude in the exercise of his prerogatives? If he is dead, what sort of death did he die, and what sort of consequences followed upon it?"84 These questions elaborate on the judgment of character, with the preferred answers seemingly implicit. No matter the circumstances of one's living, though, a few basic characteristics are portrayed by the author as of particular importance. The author explains, “In all circumstances, moreover, in which human character is chiefly studied, those four above-mentioned virtues of character will have to be applied. Thus, if we speak in praise, we shall say that one act was just, another courageous, another temperate, and another wise; if we speak in censure, we shall declare that one was unjust, another intemperate, another cowardly, and another stupid.”85 In total, the virtues the author would seek in an epideictic speech are not surprising; nonetheless, they provide a lens for understanding the main considerations for praise and blame.

For the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, this ability to excel in multiple areas is worthy of much praise. A complex, deep person is more desirable in the author's eyes. He or she explains, “A narrative based on the persons should present a lively style and diverse traits of character, such as austerity and gentleness, hope and fear, distrust and desire, hypocrisy and compassion, and the vicissitudes of life, such as reversal of fortune, unexpected disaster, sudden joy, and a happy outcome. But it is in practice exercises that these types will be worked out.”86 To use modern terms, the author here is looking to rhetorically construct a round, dynamic character instead of a static, flat character. Performing multiple roles would provide more diversity in characteristics and more for the rhetor to discuss. If nothing else the oration would be more *interesting*. Lacking a propensity for deceit, a rhetor might celebrate a subject's ability to exceed in multiple areas through a variety of behaviors tied to a core identity.
In navigating the world, one might take on a variety of roles, always tied to his or her nature as a human and as an individual. Actors, poets, and to some extent, orators take on roles in admirable, praise-worthy fashions. Such a principle would surely be applicable to persons outside those professions, as long as the roles are virtuous and in keeping with personal nature. Focusing on one's mind and conscious choices, the effective and noble performance of these roles would be worthy of praise. The roles would likely be used to describe a variety of traits and to accentuate the subject's virtue. Again, any praise would be tied certainly to the subject's core nature, with his or her behaviors highlighting an underlying, genuine faculty of justice, honor, virtue, and goodness. In a modern sense, we might think of multiple performances of identity as illuminating the inner character, the “core” of a person, providing a basis by which we could levy praise or blame. Thus, it might be that the “masks” we wear do not simply hide who we are; instead, they may channel us in various performances.

So far, I have set forth the notions of ethos and persona from ancient rhetorical theory. I will use ethos in this thesis to refer to an audience-centered understanding of a speaker’s character, as demonstrated in discourse. I will use persona to refer to the various online identities discussed in the cases. These notions surface in fascinating ways in current discourse. In the cases of this thesis, these different understandings of the subject channel the flow of discourse. The statements I study are given by individuals who are at once both participants and subjects of rhetorical engagement. Some perceive of and argue for identity as stable and underlying the entire body of a subject’s actions. Others, like Lester Faigley, might argue that in the postmodern sense, “Because the subject is the locus of overlapping and competing discourses, it is a temporary stitching together of a series of often contradictory subject positions.”

87 In discussing similar shifts in values among Aristotle, Cicero, and Thomas Wilson, Agnew explains, “The shift from a culture that assumes a set of shared values to one in which values must instead be negotiated may be seen as a feature of the transition from the classical to the modern era.”

Such a subject position is troubling, especially if ethos, persona, or character (in
their various conceptions) are dispersed through fragments in digital media. Finally, some individuals find a synthesis between these two perspectives, perhaps not unlike the combination of Cicero’s understanding of underlying character and of persona as performed in multiple situations. Among these perspectives, and still others, values are engaged through networked rhetorics. Like in the discourses of ancient rhetoric, meanings continue to be negotiated through rhetorical processes, as different philosophies and forms of identity converge in political scenarios.

**Conversation and contention in networked rhetorics**

These theoretical frameworks are not meant to prescribe any particular actions, nor are they intended as mechanisms for judgment of quality. Instead, these frameworks are intended as lenses through which we can understand the dynamics of deliberative moments in the cases below. A few initial questions might include: how is the appearance/reality dichotomy treated in the discourse? How does what counts as real potentially reflect the values of the communities engaged in deliberative processes? How are public and private actions defined in the discourse? To what extent is the boundary of public/private used to exclude various members or actions from public discourse or public scrutiny? Finally, how do the networked rhetors of each case levy praise and blame based on identity? Do they tend to follow traditional processes of praise and blame in rhetoric, or do they tend to diverge? By asking these questions, I seek to illuminate not only the dynamics of the following cases, but also to contribute to theory about appearance/reality, public/private life, and praise, blame, and character in rhetoric.

Though each case carries with it distinct rhetorical exigencies and limitations, the discourse surrounding each case engages the theoretical frameworks I have explored here. The manners in which the questions are answered will vary significantly, as will the ways in which fundamental points of contention and conversation are manifested. Still, these cases should shed light on the developing
phenomenon of digital identity's relationship to politics. Examples wedding together digital identity and politics are almost guaranteed to accelerate over time. How events like these three cases are handled in the future very well might rest on these deliberations we are able to witness in 2013 and 2014. True, the contours of these deliberative frames or *topoi* are likely to continue changing over time, but these early cases might be formative in shaping the early discourses concerning the potential boundaries of digital and offline, public and private identities. The future of digital identity discourses may for now hang in the balance. In another way, though, the future is already here.
Notes


2. Ibid., 416.

3. Ibid.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 418.

12. Ibid., 417.

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 16.

16. Ibid., 17.


18. Ibid., 13.


22. Warner explains that some publics can come to stand in for the public, thus excluding certain voices. He also indicates that the purported unity of the public depends on hierarchies that include distinctions between public and private. See: Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 84.


25. Ibid.


29. Ibid., 2.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 4.

33. Ibid.

34. Sheller and Urry, “Mobile Transformations of ‘Public’ and ‘Private’ Life”
35. Calhoun, “Nationalism and the Public Sphere.”


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid, 12.


40. Ibid.


49. Ibid, 175.


51. Debora J. Halbert, “Public Lives and Private Communities: The Terms of Service Agreement and

53. Ibid., 128.


57. Ibid., 312.


59. Miller, “Aristotle on Habit (εθς) and Character (ηθος),” 310–311.


61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 389.


65. Ibid.


67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., chap. 32.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid., chap. 147.

71. Ibid., chap. 28.

72. Ibid., chap. 34.


74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 136–137.


77. Ibid., bk. III, section 51.

78. Ibid., bk. XII, section 10.

79. Ibid., bk. IV, section 46.


81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.


84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., bk. I, section 8.

Chapter 3

When Worlds (Of Warcraft) Collide

The use of digital identity as the basis for political attacks is a relatively new and potentially divisive tactic, targeting specifically the ethos of political candidates. Pointing to perhaps multiple or fragmented identities, such phenomena illuminate the rhetorical construction of ethos in politics. In the future, such attacks could become commonplace as information linking digital and offline identities becomes more pervasive, particularly via sites like Facebook where users can share details including gamer tags and handles. Linking digital and offline identities in politics is a complex rhetorical process, involving a number of propositions and assumptions about audience. The very separation of digital and offline identities as categories rhetorically suggests a view of identity as separable and distinguishable, at least to some extent. In the case of Colleen Lachowicz, the distinctions among the reality of identity, ethos, and her persona as Santiaga are vital focal points for analysis.

On October 4, 2012, the Maine Republican Party published a press release, “Democratic Senate Candidate Colleen Lachowicz’s Disturbing Alter-Ego Revealed.”¹ The press release targeted Colleen Lachowicz, the Democratic candidate for Maine’s State Senate District 25, and focused on her World of Warcraft character, Santiaga. Evoking images of a crazed lunatic, the press release went on to condemn Lachowicz for comments she made on The Daily Kos, a news website and online forum. Included in the press release were two images of mailers that would later be sent to the constituents of Maine’s Senate District 25, as well as a link to the website www.colleensworld.com. The website, also constructed by the Maine Republican Party, consisted of one page including a number of different entries, most of which contained statements made by Lachowicz on the Web forums. The website also linked to a Twitter account, @ColleensWorld2, which put out only two Tweets during the campaign season. The press release, mailers, and website generated a firestorm of controversy, leading to one
writer describing the ordeal as a “‘World of Warcraft’ witch hunt” and another writer demanding of the Maine GOP, “Hands Off World of Warcraft!” The use of Lachowicz’s World of Warcraft character to frame political attacks was apparently not successful for the Maine GOP, given that Lachowicz eventually came to win the election. Still, the controversy generated by the attacks merits consideration, given their novel use of online identity in political rhetoric.

Interestingly, not only did the Maine GOP make a statement about Colleen’s character, but also about the very nature of gaming and digital engagement. In separating “Colleen’s [fantasy] World” from the “real world,” Maine’s Republican Party illuminated a fracture in the American zeitgeist—is the digital landscape, and in particular online gaming, detached from “reality?” Is gaming as a hobby any less legitimate than, say, crocheting? That thousands of people responded to the GOP’s attacks by proclaiming support for gamers and World of Warcraft indicates much of the public perceived the attacks as insulting gamers and games. The difference between an online game and the “real world” may seem in some ways obvious: there are no material objects and games often do not represent the offline world; in other words, gaming worlds are virtual, constructed. Yet the binary between “virtual” and “real” has been challenged by numerous scholars, including Proust, Bergson, and Deleuze, prompting new ways of thinking about situations like the Maine Republican Party’s attacks on Lachowicz. This discussion about the standing of digital activities, including video games, is exceedingly unlikely to wane, given the increasing propensity for online events and movements to impact offline affairs. The rhetoric of “Colleen's World” both highlights how online and offline identities are rhetorically constructed and provides an early case of a phenomenon society will almost certainly see often in the near future. The “reality” of games likewise is relevant as regards the eulogies of Sean “Vile Rat” Smith. While the topos of video game reality does not run through the entirety of this thesis (since it is not significant in the revealing of Edward Snowden), it is a subject worth exploring, with theory and criticism built on top of the appearance/reality pair as articulated by
To better understand the rhetorics of digital identity in the “Colleen’s World” attacks, I proceed by analyzing the texts of the press release, mailers, and website created by the Maine Republican Party. Next, I analyze the rhetoric of Lachowicz’s responses as both defense against and deflection of the GOP’s attacks. I further analyze the situational ethos of gamers and gaming, public discourse about gaming and Lachowicz’s candidacy, and the bleeding of digital and offline identities. Finally, I explore more deeply the theories outlined in chapter two as they apply to “Colleen's World.” While the Maine Republican Party’s attacks against Colleen Lachowicz are seemingly simple on the surface, they also exhibit a certain complexity and sense of contradiction. I argue that the Maine GOP’s attack on “Colleen’s World” offers a contradictory argument about digital identity, simultaneously blurring digital identity and offline identity while reinforcing the notion that World of Warcraft is merely a “fantasy world.” This “fantasy world,” separated from the “real world,” threatens Lachowicz’s ethos and delegitimizes gamers, inviting audiences to focus on the “real world” with the Maine GOP. Implicit arguments about public and private identities, wherein the “personal is political” in all cases, complicate the scenario and suggest a fundamentally gendered attack against Colleen Lachowicz.

**Attack and Defense**

The Maine GOP’s multi-pronged attack against Lachowicz offers rich textual evidence for analysis. Combining elements of verbal and visual rhetoric, the ads are cohesive but not necessarily internally consistent. Here I analyze the press release, mailers, and website, examining the rhetorical construction of “Colleen’s World” through the language of the Maine Republican Party. These documents frame the deliberation about “Colleen's World” and the November 2012 election contest. Together, they constitute a rhetorical campaign against Lachowicz, providing a rich textual foundation for criticism.
Press Release

While the headline of the press release indicates a double life, the sub-headline questions Lachowicz’s “fitness for office” as a result of her “online comments.”6 Already, “fitness for office” seems to implicate Lachowicz's mental fitness. In terms of public attacks against women, such an argument scarcely would seem surprising. The reader is thus primed to see Lachowicz through the lens of the “crazy woman,” as an irrational being. The body of the press release then frames the issue specifically around World of Warcraft, arguing that Colleen “has been living a time-consuming double life as a member of the World of Warcraft community.” Here the double life concept suggests some sort of separation, of secrecy in an effort to obscure the truth of Lachowicz's character. Next, the release portrays Lachowicz as a hardcore gamer by noting she has attained the highest level of play with her character and citing a study indicating the average WoW gamer spends 22.7 hours playing the game each week. Without drawing comparisons or specifying other numbers, readers are invited to think of terms like “obsession” and associate them with Colleen Lachowicz. This move on the part of the Maine GOP helps to establish a vision of gaming as Lachowicz's top priority, as opposed to public service. Two important arguments are opened up through this lens. First, Colleen is detached from the “real” world, a person unable to actually serve constituents. Second, in very purposefully self-deluding, Lachowicz has carried herself into a fantasy land, a place without responsibility or accountability.

Much of the release is dedicated to framing Lachowicz as crazy, disconnected from reality, and violent.7 It targets her avatar and online behavior: “Her character in the game is called ‘Santiaga,’ an Orc Assassin Rogue, and Lachowicz lives vicariously through her, making comments about World of Warcraft and other topics on the liberal blog, The Daily Kos.” Note that the GOP has included a description of the character (one that notably sounds vicious), arguing that she “lives vicariously” through Santiaga. This rhetorical move already mashes together the two identities: Lachowicz is
Santiago. Though this argument is fairly clearly implied, the term “vicarious” does problematize the situation. Generally, one would use that term to describe a person living through another person—a scenario with two distinct identities being performed. The Maine GOP, of course, does not seem to give that kind of agency to Santiago in this press release, instead making Lachowicz the locus of performance. The next section, which simply quotes Lachowicz’s comments on The Daily Kos, portrays her as mentally unstable, violent, and disrespectful. The quotes range from “Now if you’ll excuse me, I may have to go and hunt down Grover Norquist and drown him in my bath tub,” to “I like to stab things and I’m originally from NJ…. what’s your f***ing point?!” The press release then provides the link for www.colleensworld.com and provides images of two mailers for constituents before declaring, “Voters should have all the information they can obtain about those who choose to run for office. The Maine Republican Party will present that information to them and let them decide who is most able to represent them effectively.” If readers have successfully been primed to view Lachowicz through the lens of the “crazy woman,” the rhetoric is clear: Maine is in need of a stable, competent, and normal Senator.

The party makes some attempt in the press release at suggesting their concern is not simply that Lachowicz is a gamer. They note of the forum posts, “‘These are some very bizarre and offensive comments, and they certainly raise questions about Lachowicz’s maturity and her ability to make serious decisions for the people of Senate District 25,’” suggesting maturity and decision-making skills are the crux of the issue. Of course, if they are the crux of the issue, the press release argues implicitly that gaming shows a lack of maturity and ability to make good decisions. Instead of focusing on the statements as offensive comments made on a web forum, much of the text portrays World of Warcraft as a problem in and of itself, with Lachowicz’s online identity specifically being condemned. In calling it a “time-consuming double life,” the press release invites the audience to think of gaming as creating a specifically sinister alter-ego. The release, then, by design raises questions about the morals of
Santiaga, the darker side of the same woman, Colleen Lachowicz. The GOP identifies Santiaga as an “Orc Assassin Rogue,” picking out quotations that help conjure the image of a monster, including multiple references to stabbing things. Meanwhile, other quotations engage Lachowicz’s political philosophy. Quotations framing Lachowicz as lazy, socialist, and rude (in calling Tea Party members “teabaggers”) are juxtaposed against quotations framing her as insane, violent, and obsessed. The ten quotations are in some ways ordered by theme, but the lines are not perfectly clear. While quotations 1-5 largely focus on Lachowicz’s gaming behavior, quotations 5-10 seem to deal with political issues, from drowning Grover Norquist to being part of a “socialist guild” (which simply must mean she is a socialist offline). These frames resonate with recent Republican talking points, branding Democrats as lazy socialists.  

Mailers

The mailers, included with the press release, use many of the same quotations and phrases as the press release, but notably include images to reinforce the “alter-ego” theme and also create substantially the “fantasy world” versus “real world” frame. One of the mailers, which I have included here, features a split design, with about one-quarter devoted to a photo of Lachowicz, including her campaign logo, and the other three-quarters devoted to an image of “Santiaga, AKA Colleen Lachowicz.” Visually, the image reinforces not only Santiaga as an alter-ego, but actually portrays Santiaga as the dominant identity through proportion of representation. The size of Santiaga’s image is considerably larger than Lachowicz’s, guiding the audience to picture Santiaga’s likeness instead of Lachowicz’s when imagining “Colleen Lachowicz.” Rhetorically, crafting the alter-ego as the dominant identity severely degrades Lachowicz’s ethos. The logic might go like this: if Lachowicz’s identity is multiple and dominated by an online alter-ego, she must be unfit to govern. In fact, the language of the press release gets at such a logic, arguing her “comments raise questions about [her] fitness for office.” Pairing the
mailer with the text of the press release, the argumentation becomes clearer. The violent, irresponsible nature of Santiaga is actually the primary identity, even though the mailer seemed to focus more on Lachowicz than her online persona. Lachowicz spends most of her time living vicariously through Santiaga. In her attempts to hide Santiaga, she is attempting to hide the most crucial part of her personality.

If identity is Platonic in nature, if it is unified, then Santiaga must be the ground on which Lachowicz expresses her “true” self. In “real life,” then, Lachowicz would be deceiving the public by hiding the “truth” of her private life, which is what the GOP is bringing to light via the attack ads.

This tension between the “real” and “unreal” of Lachowicz’s identity is further complicated by the “real” and “unreal” of online gaming. The mailer has two claims about real and fantasy worlds, juxtaposed in the same proportions as the images of Colleen and Santiaga. First, “In our world Colleen Lachowicz is a candidate for State Senate.” This claim of “our” world appeals to citizens of the “real” and immediately creates a dichotomy between the in-group and the out-group. In this case, Colleen is certainly part of the out-group: “In Colleen’s online fantasy world, she is Santiaga, an Orc.
Here the Maine GOP sets up a dichotomy that unsurprisingly offends gamers, essentially suggesting that they are not part of “our” world because they spend so much of their time in their own “fantasy” world. The framing of Lachowicz as unfit for office because she plays *World of Warcraft* thus expands the target of the attacks from specifically Lachowicz to *WoW* players and gamers in general. Had the attacks rhetorically framed her as living in a fantasy world not centered on *World of Warcraft*, gamers might have responded in a different manner. Being relegated to a “fantasy world” and not counting in “our” world, as part of the voting public, rhetorically undermines the legitimacy of gamers as citizens. While the Maine Republican Party claims, “We're not attacking Colleen for being a gamer,” the texts of their attacks suggest just the opposite.  

*Colleen’s World, www.colleensworld.com*

The Colleen’s World website is the third vital prong of the Maine Republican Party’s attack strategy against Lachowicz. The website mostly uses quotations from Lachowicz to reinforce their attack rhetoric, similar to the quotations used in the press release. The main page of the website is designed like a blog, with a general statement at the top and multiple entries running down the page. All of the quotations entered on the website are screenshots from *The Daily Kos* Web forums. The site also includes non-quotation material. As of the election, the latest three entries included a quotation (about stabbing things), an explanation and image of Santiaga, and a video of a CNN interview in which Lachowicz discussed her comments on the Web. Perhaps the most notable feature of the website is its unique juxtaposition of Lachowicz’s image and Santiaga. A small 75 x 75 pixel image alternates between a headshot of Lachowicz and a headshot of Santiaga, fading in and out of each, so as to blur the images into each other for a brief moment in time. Unlike the mailer, which placed much emphasis on Santiaga’s likeness, the website imagery rhetorically portrays them as equal, as two sides of the same coin. In some ways, the blurring suggests they are one and the same, without one dominating the
other. This portrayal of identity hints at a unified philosophy, suggesting there is no partitioning or compartmentalizing identity—Colleen is Santiaga and Santiaga is Colleen.

The website also features a second page, entitled “What is Colleen’s World.” On this page, many of the same statements match the press release, but further details and links are added to allow users to “investigate” on their own. The site details her “‘Wreck List Guild’—Colleen/Santiaga’s WoW online alliance,” again reinforcing the notion that the two identities are inseparable. The page also posts links to her World of Warcraft profile, her user profile on The Daily Kos ("cmairead"), and a news story on The Daily Kos in which Colleen and her husband explain her Maine State Senate race. The links are vital for the site’s construction, allowing users to interact with the interface, inviting them to think of the experience as different from a traditional political attack. Instead of just reading quotations in a press release or seeing screenshots, the users can see the whole context of the statements by visiting the forums. Website technology in this case provides a kind of participatory rhetoric wherein the Maine GOP’s audience can exercise agency to make judgments. Whereas the press release and mailers simply invite a passive audience to believe the GOP, the website invites the audience to look for themselves and make an informed decision. The website does feature some direct verbal rhetoric from the GOP, including the statement at the top of each page, “Maine needs a State Senator that lives in the real world, not in Colleen’s fantasy world.” However, most of the rhetorical power of www.colleensworld.com comes from its visual arrangement, requiring audience members to make intertextual assumptions through their own eyes. The attacks, then, work together to inform the audience of the Maine GOP’s assertions and to entice users to explore further the claims the Republican Party makes about Lachowicz.

Defense

Immediately Lachowicz responded to the Maine Republican Party’s attacks, first by advancing a
statement on her campaign website, www.colleenlachowicz.com.\textsuperscript{16} Published by her campaign manager and husband Ed Lachowicz, Colleen claims, “I think it’s weird that I’m being targeted for playing online games. Apparently I’m in good company since there are 183 million other Americans who also enjoy online games. What’s next? Will I be ostracized for playing Angry Birds or Words with Friends? If so, guilty as charged!” Colleen’s first reaction is to condemn the attacks on gamers and gamer culture. By comparing herself to 183 million Americans who play online games and pointing to casual games, Lachowicz builds identification through her defense. She goes on to argue,\textit{What’s really weird is that the Republicans are going after my hobbies instead of talking about their record while they’ve been running Augusta for the last two years. Instead of talking about what they’re doing for Maine people, they’re making fun of me for playing video games. Did you know that more people over the age of 50 play video games than under the age of 18? As a gamer, I’m in good company with folks like Jodie Foster, Vin Diesel, Mike Myers, and Robin Williams. Maybe it’s the Republican Party that is out of touch.}\textit{ Again, Lachowicz frames the issue as purely one of attacking gamers. She does not specifically respond to the quotations used by the Maine GOP, instead choosing to deflect the attacks as ideological in nature. In pointing to celebrities, Lachowicz highlights folks with whom constituents might identify. The statistic concerning gamers over the age of 50 is possibly a direct reference to the base of the Republican Party, which tends to garner more of its support from older adults. In painting the GOP as “out of touch,” Lachowicz dismisses the attacks as incongruous with the views of the American public. Given seeming outrage in the media and in various comment threads and Web forums, that dismissal may be justified.\textit{ Lachowicz was subsequently bombarded with media attention, having news stories quoting her and having interviews conducted in the days following the GOP’s ads. In a number of cases,}}
Lachowicz uses arguments about time; for example, “I regret that some things I said before I knew I was running for office could be misconstrued and offended some people… Many of these comments go back quite a long time.” Such comments directly respond to the quotations the GOP used to attack Lachowicz, suggesting she might not say similar things now that she is running for office. Joystiq posted a lengthy interview with Lachowicz on October 9, 2012, detailing her reactions to the Maine Republican Party’s attacks and the controversy surrounding them. Here she posits another defense: “they were taken out of context. And it's all a mish-mash of stuff, about gaming and things like that.”

She also contends in another interview, “In the context of the game it's no different than words like 'throwing a bomb' are used in football.” A standard defense against political attacks, the out-of-context argument here suggests the setting of online gaming is different from the context of a political campaign; in other words, World of Warcraft and the “real world” of politics are different.

In the Joystiq interview, Lachowicz engages the GOP’s argument about laziness and time by noting, “When I saw that, that they tried to make out like I'm this hardcore gamer and have no life -- and I was like, ‘Did anybody check my gear score?’” In making a joke about her low gear score, Lachowicz contends that she does not play the game often. While this does contradict the Maine Republican Party’s implication that she spends too much time in “Colleen’s World,” it also does not dismiss the worthiness of such a claim even if it were true. In this instance, Lachowicz does not help to legitimate gamers, instead backing away from the time she spends gaming. An article covering the situation provided such a counterargument for Lachowicz: “It's worth noting that the average American watches more than 30 hours of television per week. Many other Americans spend their evenings and weekends at the golf course. Yet it's hard to imagine anyone suggesting that devoting 22 hours per week to those hobbies made a candidate too lazy to hold elected office.” Put in this context, the defining difference between Lachowicz’s character and that of another politician, perhaps an avid golfer, is a gamer's ethos.
Gamers have long been perceived by society as lazy and unskilled, frequently young, and usually male. The idea of a “gamer” might often conjure images of a teenage boy yelling obscenities while eating from a bag of Cheetos. While many people, for example, Matt Ringel, have been working to reverse those stereotypes, plenty of individuals still see gamers as “soda-swilling, junk food-eating slackers with an aversion to showers and social activity.”

Take for example the testimony of “Rosemary Lather,” a commenter on a Forbes article showing Barack Obama leading Mitt Romney in the gamer population: “those who are out working hard do not have time for gaming and they are voting for Romney. Those who are on the dole and sit around playing games are voting the candidate who will reward their lazy behavior rather that rewarding the hard working business people.”

With changing gamer demographics, however, such perceptions slowly may fade as more people turn to games as leisure activity, as opposed to television or other hobbies. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reports, among other statistics, that adult women gamers outnumber boy gamers under the age of 18; that 47% of all gamers are women; and that the average gamer is 30 years old and has been playing for 12 years.

The social construction and perception of gamers is a vital component of the GOP’s attacks on Lachowicz, given that the audience is asked to draw inferences based on her position as a gamer.

Lachowicz’s position as a gamer and political candidate provided representation for gamers in the greater political culture. Like the communities bolstering openly LGBTQ candidates or openly non-religious candidates, gamers rallied behind Lachowicz because she brought with her the possibility of legitimization of gamer culture, even in the face of brutal attacks from the state GOP. Lachowicz came to represent the ethos of a gamer, perhaps best understood through the moniker she earned from many bloggers: “the World of Warcraft candidate.”

Some sources described Lachowicz’s campaign in
similar terms to an LGBTQ candidate, proposing that she was “outed” as an online gamer, much in the same way a person might be “outed” as gay or lesbian. Members of Lachowicz’s guild, as well as gamers from across the country, attempted to donate to her campaign (though she could not accept the donations per local election rules); Lachowicz concluded in response, “It just really goes to show that I think those of us who do play games are eager for it not to be stereotyped anymore.”

In a November 20, 2012 interview Lachowicz proclaimed, “I think my victory speaks not only to gamers but everyone in general.” Gamers may be seen as credible in their own right, especially in dealing with technical tasks, yet identifying as a “gamer” likely does not enhance political clout, but more so identification with the audience. For representing voters, gamers may have an advantage in identifying with a large number of constituents on the sole count of being a gamer. For other political positions, such as committee memberships, the ethos of a gamer remains to be seen.

Given the proposition of electing a candidate who enjoys playing World of Warcraft, discourse about Lachowicz’s candidacy abounded on the Web in October 2012. In analyzing comment threads on a few major websites (The Huffington Post, Forbes, Ars Technica, Politico, and Glenn Beck’s The Blaze) and Lachowicz’s Facebook page, I found no shortage of support for gamers and Lachowicz. In fact, nearly all comments outside of The Blaze’s threads were uniformly positive toward Lachowicz and gamers and negative against the Maine Republican Party. Some comments on Lachowicz’s Facebook page included: “As a 52-year-old WoW player, I just want to say that if one of my representatives identified as a gamer, it would be a good thing,” as well as “MMOs have no influence on how I manage the store I run, nor on how I treat my customers; it's disingenuous of the GOP to believe sapping, eviscerating, and stabbing during your downtime has anything to do with how you will perform as a legislator,” and “Personally, the fact that you play WoW makes me think you would be a better elected official with all of the trade off’s and judgement calls you have to do in game to have a successful character.” Comments on other articles provided similar perspectives: “Seems to me that
being a gamer shows more imagination than is usually displayed by all other politicians combined,”

“I work in a corporate world … I personally know more successful gamers than not. We’re folks with
good jobs who take care of our responsibilities and have hobbies other than video games,” and “I am a
hardcore Republican, and a hardcore gamer… the digital playground is made for people of all ages,
mature adults included.” Together, these comments defend not only the ethos of gamers, but in many
ways bolster gamers as being responsible, productive members of society, representing various
demographics and personalities.

The glowingly supportive comments were, however, tempered by a few comments upholding the Maine Republican Party’s attacks. Comments on The Huffington Post, Forbes, and Politico articulated a few positions. Take for example one poster: “Well, we all know how hugely time
consuming WoW can be. Her example of Hollywood actors (who have enormous amounts of free time
that the rest of us can only dream of) is hardly a ringing endorsement. It's not like they have REAL jobs
and responsibilities like the rest of us.”

Another person notes, “Lachowicz is not being targetted for playing games. She was caught making revealing statements about her own gruesome attitude, her irresponsibility at work, and real people she has smeared and wants to see dead,” suggesting some did not view the attacks as being specifically about gaming, but instead about Lachowicz’s ethos. Yet
another poster claims, “it is VERY RELEVANT to point out how people behave while in an
anonymous game like World of Warcraft, or when you post on the forums - it is a demonstration of
exactly how you act when nobody knows who you are, and nobody is there to hold you accountable.”

The first of these comments, portraying World of Warcraft as a problem because of its time
consumption, varies significantly from the other two comments, which question Lachowicz’s behaviors, motives, and ethos in general. This comment is especially interesting, providing an excellent example of the conception of appearance/reality as inherently hierarchical: what Hollywood actors do, and what Lachowicz does, is not important because they are not real jobs. These
perspectives clearly indicate not everyone will readily separate Lachowicz’s online persona from her offline identity.

Conservative blog website The Blaze contained a few more comments degrading Lachowicz and gamers in general. The second comment declares, “If you play online games and you’re older than 19, you’re a loser, and have too much time on your hands.” This highlights an attitude among many that gamers are lazy, unproductive losers. Another comment responds, “I’m disturbed by the comments about reality mixed in with the fantasy game,” reinforcing the divide between fantasy and reality touted by the Maine GOP while suggesting there is a link between the two. For this poster, Colleen’s World is merely fantasy, not part of the “real” world, and not important. Even worse, it obscures the fact that it is unreal by containing real elements. On the other hand, even on a conservative blog site, a good number of the comments affirm that gaming is not inherently bad. Many of the posters in fact juxtapose their conservatism, older age, and business experience with playing World of Warcraft and other games, clearly navigating around a common perception of gamers as young, liberal, and lazy. The huge proportion of comments lambasting the Maine GOP, even on a clearly conservative website, suggests the attacks missed their mark. While some did concur with the content or spirit of the advertisements, degrading someone based on their identity as a gamer seems ineffective. This sentiment attests to the likely supposition that digital and offline identities are not strictly relevant to each other—at least not to everyone.

**Blending Personae, Anonymity, and Permanence**

What now can be said of the interplay between digital and offline identities? Most of the commenters and news stories seem to belittle the notion that Lachowicz’s online persona, Santiaga, might have anything to do with her offline behavior. The statements quoted by the Maine Republican Party are seemingly dismissed by most, expressing a common thread: Lachowicz is, for any of a number of
reasons, not politically harmed by her statements on *The Daily Kos*.

Millennials in general have developed in an online culture defined by segmentation. Their online accounts have not typically been linked, except perhaps by a common username. Many of their expressions have been anonymous, providing little in the way of accountability for their words.

Today’s children deal with the threat of cyberbullying and society is only beginning to take seriously the dynamics of online identities. In an age increasingly dominated by Facebook and social networks, anonymous interactions are quickly becoming less prevalent as offline identities are transferred onto the Web. As online and offline identities become less separated, the risks associated with online speech and behaviors will increase. Yet, Lachowicz and others see the future as recognizing the divide between online persona, especially those within games, and offline identities. Such tension forces the critic to consider the use of identity in rhetoric, particularly for future scenarios.

Lachowicz’s unequivocal support for the division of identities reflects the belief that online experiences are not “real.” In an interview, Lachowicz is asked whether she thinks it fair that one might be judged based upon their actions in video games, to which she responds:

> No, it isn’t fair. Video games are just games. Some people read novels; some people watch nothing but thriller movies. To me, video gaming is just another form of entertainment. People interact all the time on the Internet. I don’t think we can take what people say and do out of context. There is now a whole generation that has grown up talking and interacting online; it’s just as common as talking on the phone was. I don’t think things they say should be held against them.  

Here, Lachowicz likewise supports the claim that video games are separate from reality. This argument does not address the complexities of cyber bullying, online hate speech, and trolling. The notion that online interactions should not be applied to offline identity might well raise a few eyebrows, given the limit cases one might encounter. Still, Lachowicz raises an interesting question for the future of online
identity: should everything one has said online persist as an embodiment of their character as long as they might live? While Lachowicz’s comments were made only three years before, should a comment from 20 years ago, preserved using the advances of digital technology, “be held against” teenagers? The question is not an empty one. Society will have to deal with the possibility that a future presidential candidate had or will have a similar online persona, perhaps as loose with language as Lachowicz. Future political races may dig up this type of information for all candidates. If so, should it matter? As of today, the answer might be no. Lachowicz discusses this scenario in another interview, further articulating her worry about the future of digital identity. She notes,

> My concern is… that there's personal issues, and then there's: Are you going to kind of hold everyone up to a microscope, you know, things they've said? I really worry about young people who are living much more in the digital arena than I am, even. Is everything they say going to be held against them? I worry about it discouraging people to run for office, if they think that things from seven years ago that they may have tweeted might be held against them. There's a point where you have to have a little more sanity about this.  

Here Lachowicz’s attitude cuts off discourse, suggesting that digging up such information is not rational or sane. She moves to turn the tables, portraying the GOP as crazy and disconnected from reality.

**Appearance and Reality in “Colleen's World”**

The appearance/reality pair is pervasive in discourse about “Colleen's World.” Regarding video games, it might be safely said that they have mostly been thought of as outside reality, as virtual fantasy lands. What is particularly intriguing about these *World of Warcraft* attacks is that the Maine GOP has breached the traditional boundary between video games and “real life.” Still, though, the attacks must
work within that established framework of video games as somehow separate. This leads to the inconsistent and at times confusing rhetoric of the Maine GOP as regards Colleen Lachowicz.

Understanding “reality” as some sort of ontological existence seems to complicate intensely this particular discussion. The contradiction embedded in the Maine GOP's attacks becomes apparent in this kind of thinking. If video games are merely fantasy, then why would it matter what a person does within those games? Perhaps it would matter if a person escaped to a fantasy world on a regular basis, but if there is a distinct separation from “Colleen's World” and the “real world,” then what is done in the unreal world should stay in the unreal world. Fortunately, by considering the appearance/reality pair in this rhetoric as establishing hierarchies by which actions are judged, the discourse begins to make more sense.

If reality is the rule by which appearance is assessed, the “reality” the Maine GOP has constructed is at the core of the “Colleen's World” scenario. The GOP does not rely on textual constructions of reality, but instead on enthymematic reasoning of what is real. Terms like “our world” tend to portray a shared reality, defined by the interaction of real people—people with names and faces not rendered by computers. Because real people use computers to simulate various interactions, they are able to engage in non-real worlds. It is through the connection of real person and unreal world that actions taken in “Colleen's World” can matter at all. The Maine GOP measures reality by human actions, relegating video games and virtual worlds to mere technological tools. Digital identity, then, would seem to not be real in any way. Perplexingly, though, Santiaga is given agency in the rhetorical constructions of the mailer and the website in particular. Santiaga does not seem to be merely an extension of Colleen Lachowicz, but something separate through which Lachowicz lives vicariously.

Importantly, these are political attacks likely designed to reach right-wing and moderate voters. For those voters, the Maine Republican Party has likely reasoned that they might be able to point to a shared reality—one where individuals have absolute responsibility for their actions and where figures
like Lachowicz violate the norms of decorum and (implicitly at least) traditional white male privilege.\textsuperscript{40} Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's framing of value systems is especially helpful in this case.\textsuperscript{41} We might recall their claim that “In [appearance], then, reality and value are closely linked. This conception is specially pronounced in all the constructions of the metaphysicians.”\textsuperscript{42} If the shared value system is one of individual responsibility and of traditional and proper behavior, Lachowicz violates that value system at almost every moment. The perhaps flawed assumption that Republicans tend to cater to older individuals would make a lot of sense in this case. The GOP, though, might be making a flawed assumption in its own right, believing that older individuals would scorn video games and people who spend copious amounts of time on the Web.

Lachowicz and many of the aforementioned commenters support Lachowicz's argument that “Video games are just games.”\textsuperscript{43} This position reinforces the dichotomy of “real” and “virtual,” “fake,” or “simulated.” That dichotomy is particularly powerful, especially when left unquestioned. As I detailed in chapter two, scholars might gain something by thinking of two critical theories juxtaposed with the appearance/reality pair as they relate to “Colleen’s World.” Debord’s \textit{Society of the Spectacle} and Baudrillard’s \textit{Simulacra and Simulation} can shed light on these hidden dynamics of “Colleen’s World.” By reading these texts as rhetorical constructions within Debord and Baudrillard’s contexts, these stories begin to form new, divergent narratives. Debord’s claim in \textit{Society of the Spectacle} that “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” suggests that the social experiences we have are not direct experience, but are instead diverted through mediation.\textsuperscript{44} When macro-level economies became central to social life, humans went from \textit{being} to \textit{having} as the primary goal of existence. Now we live in yet another era, in which possession is not as important as appearance to possess. Our goal in modern society is representation; we project our perceived possession through representation. Debord’s work becomes particularly relevant when considering his explanation of the “real.” He explains, “For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are
transformed into real beings.”

The spectacle’s primary purpose is self-preservation. Spectacle leads humans to fantasize not about uncharted paradises but about the very mediated world in front of them. In today’s society, something like Facebook represents the epitome of Debord’s spectacle: even when given the material ability to speak face-to-face with someone, many prefer the mediated, commodified interactions of digital walls and “like” buttons.

To read “Colleen’s World” from the perspective of spectacle highlights the widespread commodification of *World of Warcraft* and other online experiences. Avatars are perfect examples of the need to create mediated self-representations. Lachowicz, then, is still engaging in spectacle at every step of the way. But the spectacle has a much more important function in this context: questions of “reality” are suppressed and the power structures associated with “real” society remain unquestioned and unquestionable. Our conceptions of the “real” are bounded by what is re-mediated and represented: corporeal bodies, governments, corporations, currency, economy. That the “real” world is real is taken for granted in the discourses of “Colleen’s World” because people have been conditioned to believe in the imagery crafted by politicians and experts of public relations. For Debord, the offline world *appears* real because spectacle has obfuscated the false premises of mediated discourse. In this way, even Debord’s values are obvious when reading what he prioritizes as real. The commodified, spectacular world is merely appearance, obfuscating real human connections and action.

On the other hand, *World of Warcraft* poses an interesting problem for spectacle. Portrayed as merely fantasy, it is still a mediated representation of society. Perhaps the more people engage with games like *World of Warcraft* and with other almost inherently “unreal” activities online, the more those games and activities will become reality. Facebook is already a prime example of turning mediated imagery—walls and comment threads—into “reality.” This may help explain the contradiction inherent in the Maine GOP’s rhetoric: it is generally recognized as merely a “fantasy world,” but more and more *World of Warcraft* (along with other video games) is becoming a part of
society’s reality. Spectacle is now subsuming the digital identities once claimed as distinct from offline existence and making them a part of the “real” offline world. There is a general shifting from anonymity online to identity disclosure, especially in social networking. Cyberutopia has succumbed to the spectacle.

Baudrillard’s interpretation of the “real” provides a different and perhaps more explanatory perspective for “Colleen’s World.” Baudrillard argues that all of society has moved from “real” lived experiences to simulation. His four stages of imagery in society suggest an ongoing shift toward simulation. Thus, the images society has created over time have become self-serving and have created a simulation completely separate from any “reality” that might exist. Still, though, society continues forward with perceptions of the “real.” Baudrillard’s use of Disneyland as a primary example of simulacra and simulation is vital. Because “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real,” the consumer is lured into a social hierarchy.46 He goes on to suggest, “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp.”47 As a result, an implosion of meaning has allowed complete simulation.48

Supposing that games are simulated experiences, where do Baudrillard’s thoughts come in? Calleja points out the construction of reality: “The real is contrasted to the imaginary, the forged, the fictional, the computer generated or, more generally, the mediated.”49 If “real” experiences are only offline, corporeal events, what matters (is valued) is severely limited. That proposition does not hold much water, though, particularly if we consider the aforementioned binary of “virtual” and “real” challenged by many scholars. Van Doorn describes that virtuality is not simply a state of non-existence, but an intangibility; thus, what is virtual is not inherently “unreal.”50 Online environments, then, are both digital and virtual.51 Digital games are not “unreal” then, but intangible experiences, simulations. Calleja contextualizes games as not unlike most hobbies, pontificating, “So are digital
games escapist? Not any more than any other engaging activity.” In writing of the relation between Baudrillard and video games, Crogan asserts that computer games “could… be operating to deter us from perceiving the ‘serious’ world outside of computer games as an ensemble of predesigned, interactive experiences regulated by operational objectives and challenges devoid of authentic stakes or significance.” In this context, “Colleen’s World” takes on a new role. *World of Warcraft* generally might be functioning as purely “fantasy” to reinforce its dichotomy with the “real” world, which is simply no more than simulation. In this case, the Maine Republican Party calling out “Colleen’s World” may be an attempt to draw a line between the fantasy of online gaming and the “real” world. Lachowicz is then not living in the “real” world and is unable to handle the duties of real, concrete existence in the political sphere. Just like Disneyland serves as a foil for the “real” Los Angeles, “Colleen’s World” serves as a foil for the “real” world inhabited by the Maine GOP. Many questioned why the Maine GOP would even choose to attack Lachowicz’s *World of Warcraft* gaming, but the attacks serve divert attention away from the simulated nature of the GOP’s “real” world. Attacking “Colleen’s World” is not about breaking apart *World of Warcraft* but about protecting their own fantasy—the fantasy that a “real” world exists at all.

**Life, Public and Private**

Lachowicz found herself trapped in the attacks of “Colleen's World.” In offline communication, one might point to public and private spheres. Political communication is almost inherently public in all of Habermas’ potential definitions of public, but personal details including those concerning family are sometimes relegated to the private sphere. Where, then, might public and private spheres fall online? One might call Facebook and Twitter public-oriented sites (because of their inclusiveness and visibility to all—as in Habermas’ first definition of public), but what about a Web forum or a video game? Here there are some of the same concerns of offline communication, asking where one might be able to
draw the line between public and private. Such a conundrum will surely be a vital question in the future of digital identity and digital communication, particularly as political events increasingly take place online. Lachowicz seemingly argues everything online should be considered private, or at least that online activity should not be held against people. Often in offline political communication, just about anything is “fair game” for political attacks, including candidates’ hobbies and family affairs. *World of Warcraft* being off limits, then, is somewhat peculiar. Relevance may be a factor. Perhaps *World of Warcraft* here is thought of as one might think of an avid *Harry Potter* fan—that it is merely escape and should not be subject to political criticism. Overall, though, the boundaries are not clear, perhaps shifting in the wake of the digital revolution.

Weintraub's models of public and private might be especially helpful here. The Maine GOP seems to operate in the “republican-virtue” or “classical” approach, framed by questions of politics, community, and citizenship.55 Because Lachowicz has entered the public sphere, seeking office in the capacity of service, all of her actions are relevant to the political campaign at hand. Lachowicz, on the other hand, seems to operate in the “liberal-economistic model,” where her participation in the state apparatus is separate from her participation in the market.56 Her actions in *World of Warcraft*, then, are exercised separately from the state, in a realm where she should have the right to privacy. The seemingly incompatible models of public and private behavior might explain the central contestation between the Maine GOP and Lachowicz. Of course, Weintraub's discussion of feminist models of public and private is particularly salient in this case. The rallying cry of “the personal is political” is highly problematic for Lachowicz.57 Public memory very well might recall this rallying cry, and individuals observing the scenario might question why Lachowicz has distanced herself from this common notion of public and private behavior. Clearly, Lachowicz does not mean to be excluded from the public sphere, but she does continue to distinguish personal life from public life, a notion often eschewed in feminist critique of the public sphere.
As I noted previously, the “personal is political” line of thinking can subject individual identities to politicization, particularly when the notion is divorced from the original intent of second-wave feminist thinkers. The Maine GOP has seized that opportunity in this case, making Lachowicz's identity a point of contestation. The success of Lachowicz as a political candidate does not necessarily mean that there has been a shift from judging people based on “what they presumably are” as opposed to “what they do or say.” The many forum posts celebrating Lachowicz's identity as a gamer largely do not assess her political stances or actions, instead focusing on identification with Lachowicz. For those supporting Lachowicz, though, this was an important moment to contest identity. Like moments wherein LGBTQ identities or racial identities have been contested, attacks on gamers allow individuals to dispute the power exercised by actors like the Maine Republican Party. In short, from a feminist perspective, it becomes necessary to contest those who would seek to subvert others based solely on their identities. Because Lachowicz's identity was not merely private, an opportunity arose for public contestation of the values embedded in the “Colleen's World” attacks. This moment allowed people to speak out against forces of oppression in the public realm. That Lachowicz won the election suggests voters might value video games not as real-world reflections of reality, but as legitimate channels through which individuals can escape and play.

Reflections

The Maine GOP advanced in the notion of Colleen’s World something of a Ciceronian perspective about identity. While Lachowicz might don the mask of Santiaga, or vice versa, the underlying person is still the same, and should be judged accordingly. On the other hand, Lachowicz and the gaming community largely rejected this notion of a shared identity, instead arguing that the identities are fragmented and separate. In each performance, Lachowicz’s or Santiaga’s ethos is determined by the situational particulars. What seems to be happening is a shift from the classic conception of the self
(wherein one identity underlies human action) to the postmodern conception of the self (wherein one’s various performances are separate and fragmented). Each network of rhetors—on one hand the GOP, and on the other Lachowicz and the gaming community in general—holds specific values. For the GOP, there is a political motivation to portray convergence of Lachowicz and Santiaga as one agent acting in various scenarios. For Lachowicz and her supporters, there is political motivation to keep the identities distinct, since the attacks against her are only relevant if the identities are seen as somehow linked. As the networks overlap in specific venues, for example, in comment threads on news articles and in competing campaign messages, deliberation ensues and contention develops.

Fascinatingly, each party portrays the other as “out of touch” with reality. The GOP contends that Lachowicz is out of touch with the reality of her constituents, since she spends too much time invested in the *World of Warcraft*. The GOP thus claims access to “reality,” seemingly defined as the offline world of politics and government. Lachowicz, on the other hand, portrays also the GOP as out of touch with constituents, many of whom are avid gamers. “Reality” for Lachowicz is a shared social value, as opposed to inhabitation of a particular public realm of politics. Thus, each party’s argument about the need to separate or bring together various identities is framed around a truth claim. The resistance to attacks and blame against Lachowicz is palpable, but it is resisted through the contention that various *personae* are irrelevant and fragmented—this, for them, is the truth of identity. That truth claim masquerades what seems to be the predominant concern: tactical political advantage. The GOP seeks an advantage in the election, and Lachowicz looks to curtail their efforts. Either way, despite the presence of postmodern thinking about identity, there is a surprisingly strong claim to a truth, and seemingly a truth that, in the eyes of each network, should be universalized. In the collision of Worlds of Warcraft, gravity pulls discourse toward the art of *political* craft.
Notes


7. "Crazy" here might come to resemble something like schizophrenia. Intriguingly, Deleuze and Guattari treat schizophrenia as similar to the rhizome, where chaos and disorder control the subconscious. This interpretation might suggest the GOP is uncomfortable with the disorderly conditions of postmodernity. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 18.


10. Sorenson, “Candidate’s Bizarre Double Life Raises Questions”

11. Of at least some interest here is the use of the term “assassination” instead of “assassin,” as the Maine GOP used in the original press release. Functionally, the terms are not terribly different, but assassination tends to conjure images that haunt the American psyche, including presidential deaths. It could simply be a misspelling, but the change in terms does create a different rhetorical construction of Lachowicz.


14. This kind of interactivity is what might be referred to as “user-to-system interactivity.” For an interesting taxonomy of interactivity, see Barbara Warnick and David Heineman, *Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media*, 2nd ed, Frontiers in Political Communication v. 22 (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 51–61.

15. Susan Delagrange writes of arrangement in digital rhetoric, “Linking is the 'hyper' of hypermedia, the sine qua non of texts in hyperspace; it is also the visual and meaningful embodiment of the canon of arrangement online. A link consists of a visual signal (an underlined word, a labeled icon, a 'hot spot' that is revealed when the cursor arrow turns into a white, pointing hand) and an implied message ('There is a relationship between where you are now—on the screen, on the Web—and where clicking this link will take you.')” Susan H Delagrange, *Technologies of Wonder Rhetorical Practice in a Digital World* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press: Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2011), 107, http://ccdigitalpress.org/wonder/.


20. Poisso, “Interview: Maine Senate Candidate Tells Why Gamer Shaming Bodes Ill for the Future”


29. Lachowicz, “Colleen Lachowicz for State Senate | Facebook”

30. Lee, “Candidate for Maine State Senate Attacked over Warcraft Character (Updated)”


32. Johnson, “Maine Democratic Candidate Colleen Lachowicz’s ‘Double Life’ On World of Warcraft Criticized By GOP [UPDATED]”


34. Friess, “‘Warcraft’ Candidate: Gaming Is Misunderstood”


36. Ibid.

37. Fenn, “Inside Colleen’s World: Senator-elect Talks World of Warcraft and Politics”

39. See chapter 2: reality is something of a measuring stick, constructed in order to give us a mechanism by which we can judge.

40. I am referring here to something of a neoliberal sense of responsibility, one in which individuals pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and where privilege is not actively contemplated. For the Maine GOP, inhabiting the reality, the “public sphere,” is an exercise wherein all of an individual's acts are relevant.


42. Ibid.

43. Poisson, “Interview: Maine Senate candidate tells why gamer shaming bodes ill for the future.”

44. Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 12.

45. Ibid, 17.

46. Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 12.

47. Ibid, 13.


49. Ibid.


51. Ibid.

52. Calleja, “Digital Games and Escapism”


54. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 1.


56. Ibid.

58. Ibid, 175.
Chapter 4

Mourning Vile Rat

The relationship between video games and the military is not new, but its role in the death of Sean Smith is a novel event.\(^1\) *EVE Online* is a unique video game for many reasons. In the game, tens of thousands of players come together in one online “universe,” a universe in which players can create space ships, colonies, and alliances. Unlike other games, wherein a character might die repeatedly only to “respawn,” the death of a character in *EVE Online* is permanent.\(^2\) As a result, the bonds within the game take on particular significance. Alliances within *EVE Online* are vital, as players must band together to survive and thrive. The game’s universe goes through moments of political turmoil much as do the countries on the physical planet Earth. Diplomats and diplomacy, then, are of particular importance. One author, writing on behalf of the *EVE Online* Community, put it this way: “Leaders of alliances and their directors can, over time, achieve a cult of personality status that is analogous with what you see in real world politics. This is primarily because many of EVE’s players are typically using real world skills and knowledge to get ahead in the virtual world.”\(^3\) Among the most well-known diplomats, and indeed well-known personalities, of *EVE Online* was Vile Rat (VR). The aforementioned author went on to note, “Over the years, VR rose to become one of the most well-known and respected diplomats for one of the most powerful Alliances in EVE. He was instrumental in shaping the universe we all play in today.”\(^4\) Vile Rat was a prominent force in the *EVE Online* community. For some, Vile Rat's story extended beyond the character and avatar, knowing that Vile Rat was performed by Sean Smith, a United States Air Force veteran working in the State Department.

In performing Vile Rat, Smith performed the role in a complex, thoughtful, and seemingly genuine fashion. One of Vile Rat's friends, The Mittani, wrote of him, “If you play this stupid game, you may not realize it, but you play in a galaxy created in large part by Vile Rat’s talent as a diplomat.
In *EVE Online*, Smith created a separate identity. Vile Rat was seen not as a *persona* of Sean Smith, but instead as a unique identity within the game. Many of his in-game friends knew his real name, occupation, and location, but the relationships were created through the characters in the game. Mittani goes on to explain, “He had the vision and the understanding to see three steps ahead of everyone else - in the game, on the CSM (Council of Stellar Management, an out-of-game meeting to coordinate the *EVE* universe), and when giving real-world advice.” Vile Rat was an integral part of the *EVE Online* community, much as a United States diplomat is a vital part of offline affairs. Notes Mittani, “His influence over the grand game and the affairs of Nullsec [the lawless region of *EVE*] cannot be overstated. If you were an alliance leader of any consequence, you spoke to Vile Rat. You knew him. You may have been a friend or an enemy or a pawn in a greater game, but he touched every aspect of *EVE* in ways that 99% of the population will never understand.”

Since Smith's death in the raid on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, Vile Rat has been hailed as a model diplomat, especially in the *EVE* community. He fostered an atmosphere of professionalism and hard work in the game through his work with the faction known as “The Goons.” Notes one journalist,

Vile Rat sought peace where others sought war …. Smith spent hours a day communicating with his fellow online diplomats, analyzing chat logs, examining intelligence. He created the Corps Diplomatique, based on his experience in the State Department. It was structured as a group consisting of chief and junior representatives. Getting into the Corps wasn’t easy. Smith made prospective diplomats go through a demanding application process. They had to write essays and analyze political history. They had required reading: *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, The 48 Laws of Power, How to Win Friends and Influence People*. They also had to pass tests on solving diplomatic
challenges.

By taking seriously the game's inner workings, Vile Rat became something of an educator and a model citizen. He became the *vir bonus* of the *EVE Online* universe. More than that, Vile Rat/Sean Smith was hailed by essentially every community as a model citizen, both in offline affairs and in *EVE Online*. Living the life of a public man, Vile Rat's behavior in the “unreal” *EVE Online* world was still rhetorically portrayed as an important part of Sean Smith.

**Community outpouring**

*The Memorial Thread*

On the night of September 11, 2012, insurgents stormed the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, killing four U.S. diplomats, including Sean Smith. Smith, who had played *EVE Online* for years, had become known both through his character, Vile Rat, and through his offline engagements with other players in the game. Most of the players, though, knew Smith as Vile Rat; as such, the community’s outpouring was largely directed toward the in-game character. The *EVE Online* community mourned Vile Rat as a player of great significance through two main mediums: first through forum posts on the *EVE Online* Web forums, and additionally through an elegant video eulogy. On the *EVE Online* forums, a now seventy-one-page message thread announcing Vile Rat's death contains several hundred messages of mourning. The first message proclaims, “The galaxy will be a much smaller place without you. You will be missed,” and goes on to note, “A donation fund has gone up for his wife and kids.” Another poster remarks,

I've had the honor of getting to know Sean via the CSM alumni channel, and had several private exchanges with him as well during my term. I regret not being able to get to know him better in the time we had. I could tell one thing though - the man was passionate about the game, and passionate about his community, and had he run in CSM8 as the
CFC representative he would have made a strong chairman. Rest in peace, Sean. EVE will miss you. You served both your community and your country with excellence.\textsuperscript{10}

Many posters explain that they did not know Vile Rat, but either heard of his legacy or wished they had the honor of playing with him. The tone consistently is one of sadness and loss, pointing to the virtues Vile Rat brought to the \textit{EVE Online} community and calling for togetherness in a time of turmoil. With well over a thousand posts in the forum thread, most of which come from unique users, the community turned out in mass to honor the memory of a comrade. Importantly, that comrade is referred to as Vile Rat by most of the posters. To the members of the \textit{EVE Online} community, Vile Rat was the better-known identity. In the forum thread, Vile Rat is the central focus of mourning, starting even with the title of the thread, “R.I.P. Vile Rat.”\textsuperscript{11}

Though not a typical memorial experience, the comment thread became something of a collaborative memorial for Vile Rat, recognizing his contributions to the game and to offline diplomacy. On the seventy-first and final page of the thread (the thread was locked by administrators after a week to prevent future entries), forum moderator ISD Suvetar explains, “This is a memorial thread.”\textsuperscript{12} The concept of a memorial thread on a Web forum is especially interesting. Many memorials are constructed in a unified manner, a single object resulting from planning and execution. The Vile Rat memorial forum thread instead reads something like the AIDS Quilt: it brings together a multitude of voices to create something larger than the individual messages.\textsuperscript{13} Its closing suggests a bounded-ness, barring future discourses of convergence and possible incivility. Even though the thread has been closed, it contains some 1,414 posts, constituting a large outpouring of community support in a sizable memorial. Aesthetically, the memorial takes the shape of the \textit{EVE Online} forums, fitting into its color scheme and threading structure. Avatar images accompanying individual posters' messages tend to be representations of the posters' \textit{EVE Online} characters. These elements combined seem to set the memorial thread within the frame of the \textit{EVE Online} video game. For many, that would constitute a
separation from “reality.” Still, the statements made on the forums, largely text-based messages, suggest that the forum memorial is not integrated entirely into the game. In this way, the forum memorial functions similarly to Facebook memorials, often understood through the metaphor of a wall.14

Throughout the memorial thread are statements about the seriousness of EVE Online. In the pages of the thread, members provide various takes on what the game means. Most members focus on the tangibility of the offline world and seem to subordinate the game world's importance to it. Pipa Porto explains, “All of us signed up to play this silly game of submarines and pixels and all of a sudden we find that we do care about each other. Beyond any shouting we may do when we disagree, what affects one of us, what affects a group within our community affects us all.”15 Here Porto subordinates the unreality of EVE Online to the real connections built among the people playing the game. By calling it “silly,” Porto frames EVE Online as a hobby set aside from the more important, less silly moments of life. Harataka advances a similar notion, claiming, “It's a small world, friends, and no matter what we think of each other in-game, there are real people behind the internet spaceships. This is the third time someone I've known through video games has been KIA [killed in action] and it doesn't hurt any less than it does for the few people I've known in RL [real life] that have shared the same fate. I truly wish that some day the only violence we have to worry about would be in a video game.”16 Harataka's post advances the common imagery of person-behind-computer, separating the two actions as if to declare a difference between offline person and online persona. The language of “in [real life]” indicates the poster's understanding that Vile Rat was not real, so much as he was a performance of the real Sean Smith. Such a claim is scarcely controversial, but the propensity to declare it is telling, as if to remind the EVE Online community that what it does is not actually real.

A number of posters focus more on the relationship between the online world and the offline world, and still others provide detailed accounts of in-game relationships. Andreus Ixiris contends that
It's easy to forget that on the other end of that character portrait, there's a human being, just like you. A human being who has feelings and dreams and fears and hopes and friends and family, just like you. A human being who's flesh and blood, just like you. A human being who enjoys the game, just like you. And it's hard, not just to deal with but to even comprehend, that sometimes, that person can die. That even though that character portrait and forum account is still there, they're gone, and they're never coming back. That character portrait stares back at you and you expect to hear their voice on Ventrilo or see them write something in corp chat but it's never going to happen again. The internet gives things that are gone a strange and sometimes hurtful permanence.17

While this post focuses on corporeal being, it also provides interesting perspective about public memory. For Andreus, interaction on the Web seems to have special lasting effects, with online permanence holding events in memory in a powerful fashion. Other posters point to the lasting effects Vile Rat's absence will have on the community. One remarks, “The Sandbox won't feel the same without Vile Rat's shovel moving through it, both in game and with his efforts elsewhere. Rest in Peace, Vile Rat. May your spaceships always fly safe wherever you opted to go.”18 Here Vile Rat is treated as the primary subject, the memories of the character centered in the post. The common “may your...” statement is framed in the context of the game, where the imagery of spaceships drives character relationships. Another poster adds, “I can tell you that he cared a ton for Eve, and New Eden is a darker place without him.”19 These messages highlight the strength of the memory of Vile Rat in the community. For these posters and others, even though Sean Smith was controlling the Vile Rat character, they will remember the interactions in the game. In total, the memorial thread emphasizes the offline impacts of Sean Smith's death, but still mourns EVE Online's Vile Rat.
A quick search on YouTube for “Vile Rat” returns dozens of tribute videos made by fellow *EVE Online* players. The most popular video, “*EVE Online*: Vile Rat Cyno Vigil Tribute (1080p),” shows as the top result as of December 2013, with a view count of just over 57,000. Hailed by Kotaku as the *EVE Online* tribute to Vile Rat, the video is positioned as definitive, speaking for the community. The video brings visuals, music, and voices to comments similar to those on the message board. The clip relies on images of the game, including scenarios played out specifically for the purpose of memorialization. It opens with a sequence of what seems to be fast travel in outer space, with stars whizzing by. Simultaneously, there is a recounting of the attack in Benghazi through audio clips of news reports. The stellar scene fades and text is displayed: “One of the victims was an *EVE Online* player. To the rest of the world, his name was Sean Smith. To us, his name was Vile Rat.” The community immediately recognizes that others might know Smith by his offline character and turns the video’s earliest images of interstellar travel draw attention away from the “real world,” inviting the viewer to consider something else. After recalling the extremist attacks of Benghazi, the video identifies through text that “one of the victims was an *EVE Online* player.” The term “player” provides an identity marker. It is not merely that Sean Smith played *EVE Online*, but that he was defined, in part, by his relationship to the game—a gamer, a player, a part of the community.

Text over the video argues next, “EVE may only be a virtual world, but the connections we make are real.” The video thus reinforces a split between the “real” world and the “virtual” world, suggesting that what occurs in *EVE Online* is not as important as what happens elsewhere, a notion reinforced by the qualifier that *EVE* may *only* be a virtual world. Visually, the video depicts scenes in the game, stars in the background, with spaceships in their shields arranged to spell out, “RIP Vile Rat.” Intriguingly, the video has separated *EVE* as a virtual world while focusing on that virtual world.
through the imagery of the video. In this way, the video still reinforces the game as important, as making connections among people. Meanwhile, the music bed provides what could best be described as heroic music, elevating the actions of Vile Rat, evoking feelings of bravery, of honor and dignity in the *EVE* universe. Juxtaposed with the images of that universe, the viewer might come to understand acts of diplomacy and helpfulness as noble character markers worthy of praise.

Many voices praise Vile Rat, making statements such as, “He was always there to turn to, and he will be missed by the greater community;” “He helped me out even though it wasn't even his job;” “This game is more than just a game. This community comes together and honors this guy. Being a service member myself, I just want to say rest in peace, Vile Rat;” “It's never a good day when a good man goes down. See you among the stars, tough guy;” and “He would be the first person to offer the shirt off of his back if he could, for anybody. He gave a lot of support to the smaller alliances that were out here and he was never too big to reach out to little dudes . . . If it wasn't for him, this coalition and the people that are around us, that you all know right now, if it wasn't for him, you guys wouldn't know each other.”

The many voices here mourn Vile Rat, in something much closer to a formal eulogy, reading statements about Vile Rat's virtues as a good diplomat, a kind heart, and a patient friend. Each statement focuses on his role within the game: being in the stars, working with small alliances, and being missed by the community. The most interesting comment, though, is that the “game is more than just a game.” The suggestion here seems to be that *EVE Online* is something more than mere game. It rises above the rest. Strong connections are forged, friendships are made, and the experience transcends the video game medium. In that transcendence, it would seem *EVE Online* has become somehow more real.

The video closes with an image of Sean Smith's face juxtaposed with the face of Vile Rat's avatar, with “1978-2012” written below. The two faces are given equal space and sized similarly, as if to suggest that both Sean Smith and Vile Rat were important figures. Unlike the representations of
Colleen Lachowicz, these images offer some sort of separation of the two identities without blatantly creating some sort of hierarchy between them. Much of video's discourse, though, is aimed specifically at the legacy of Vile Rat as a player in the *EVE Online* community. From a rhetorical perspective, these eulogies should not be (and are not) difficult to explain. One person's character is being honored, although there are hints of talking about Sean Smith. Being more familiar with Vile Rat, it makes sense for the *EVE Online* community to anchor its mourning in Vile Rat. In contrast, major news outlets and journalists framed the story around Sean Smith, as a good man successful in multiple roles. They mourned a man and his avatar, instead of an avatar and its player.

**The Many Masks of Sean Smith**

On Tuesday, Sean Smith, a Foreign Service Information Management Officer assigned to the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya, typed a message to the director of his online gaming guild: “Assuming we don’t die tonight. We saw one of our ‘police’ that guard the compound taking pictures.” The consulate was under siege, and within hours, a mob would attack, killing Smith along with three others, including the U.S. ambassador.

In his professional and personal life, Smith was a husband and father of two, an Air Force veteran, and a 10-year veteran of the Foreign Service who had served in Baghdad, Pretoria, Montreal and The Hague. But when gaming with *EVE Online* guild Goonswarm, he was a popular figure known as “Vile Rat,” and alternately as “Vilerat” while volunteering as a moderator at the internet community Something Awful. Smith’s death was confirmed on Wednesday morning by the State Department and reported widely in the news media.26

Written by a journalist at *Wired*, this piece reflects the common treatment of Sean Smith's death in news
media outlets. Smith is the anchor identity, merely performing Vile Rat in *EVE Online*. The central person, Sean Smith, embodied different *personae* as father, veteran, and gamer. Another journalist remarks, “Sean Smith lived in two worlds, but he died in one. His death came in the world where he worked.”

In these two cases and more, Smith's character in *EVE Online* is treated as an extension of his whole identity. The reports repeatedly compare Vile Rat to Sean Smith, drawing a connection between the two, using Vile Rat's behavior as evidence for Smith's good nature. Variations do exist, though, in the eulogies for Smith. Vile Rat's relationship to Smith's offline character changes in a few fascinating ways. In many ways, the rhetors seem uncertain in attempting to handle the two identities.

In one case, Smith's playing *EVE Online* is framed as something peculiar. That article notes, “Sean Smith gave his life in the service of American diplomacy, but, strangely, he also spent much of his free time online entangled in intergalactic political intrigue.” Unclear is what is particularly strange about the situation. The article seems to operate on the assumption that what people do in video games is different from what they do in the “real world,” an assumption violated by Smith's diplomacy both inside and outside *EVE Online*. In another case, a journalist explains, “Yesterday, we discovered that Sean Smith, one of the four U.S. officials killed in Libya, had another life. In addition to being a husband, father and member of the U.S. Foreign Service, he was Vile Rat, a powerful member of the *EVE Online* community and every bit the diplomat in the virtual world that he was in the real world.”

The framing of “another life” seems especially different here. Smith is framed as seemingly having multiple identities, leading completely separate lives, as opposed to playing multiple different roles in his everyday life. These two accounts of Sean Smith hint at something deviant. Being a gamer, in these popular press venues, seems to be something out of the normal. Like the Maine GOP’s account of Colleen Lachowicz, there is an assumption that what people do on the Web is sinister, strange, and secretive.

Perhaps the most intriguing eulogy for Smith was delivered by United States Secretary of State
Hillary Clinton. She remarks,

Sean Smith joined the State Department after six years in the Air Force. He was respected as an expert in technology by colleagues in Pretoria, Baghdad, Montreal, and the Hague. He enrolled in correspondence courses at Penn State and had high hopes for the future. Sean leaves behind a loving wife, Heather, two young children, Samantha and Nathan, and scores of grieving family, friends, and colleagues. And that's just in this world. Because online, in the virtual world that Sean helped create, he is also being mourned by countless competitors, collaborators, and gamers who share his passion.30

What is particularly odd about these remarks is not the text, but the delivery of the words. When Clinton begins to say, “And that's just in this world,” she gives a pause and a strange break, as if she does not know how to handle the delivery of the line. Her tone suggests something odd about the entire exchange. Surely something is odd, of course—eulogizing a person for their actions in an online gaming world is a novel rhetorical challenge, particularly when the eulogy is addressing the accolades of a U.S. Foreign Service expert. Smith's legacy as serving his country does not quite match the tone of serving a group in *EVE Online* called “The Goons.”31 Still, in both cases Smith developed a just, noble, and diplomatic character, as if wearing different masks over the same core identity. Clinton, perhaps under-informed as to Smith's online character, seems unsure how to handle the fact that so many people are mourning another role he has played. Of course, the “competitors, collaborators, and gamers” mourn Sean Smith (hence the line, “the virtual world that Sean helped create”), at least for the purposes of Clinton's eulogy. Vile Rat is again an alter-ethos or persona of sorts, but it is still Sean Smith behind the mask. Clinton represents a different perspective about the situation: she is, in part, his boss at the highest level (in the State Department). Her duty is indeed to honor everything Smith did, but only Smith as the man working in the U.S. Foreign Service.
Though not an orator per se, Smith exhibited the kind of goodness and morality sought by the likes of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Might, then, Smith's actions in *EVE Online* merit note as Clinton eulogized him? Given the time constraints, such a proposition seems difficult. The audience of Clinton's speech, essentially the general American public, is largely unfamiliar with video games like *EVE Online*. Clinton was tasked with honoring a servant to the United States government, a task undertaken at least in part to affirm faith in the government and ensure unity. Given more time to explain *EVE Online* and Vile Rat, such remarks might be appropriate. After all, Smith made a conscious choice to dedicate his life to diplomatic service, both online and offline. He took on a variety of roles—father, United States diplomat, forum moderator, in-game diplomat for *EVE Online*—and, as far as anyone is willing to say, executed his duties to the best of his ability, always looking to serve and help others in need. For ancient rhetoricians, Smith's personal nature would likely be constituted by public service, as evidenced by his time in the Air Force and the State Department. Using those skills of diplomacy, even if under the mask of Vile Rat, would fit his personal nature, highlighting his underlying faculties of honor, justice, virtue, and goodness.

A number of mourners did treat Smith much like one might envision ancient rhetoricians doing. The essential argument is that Smith was a diplomat through and through, even as he took on different roles online and offline. One writer muses, “What struck me about the McClatchy story about Smith’s experience in both real and virtual worlds was how admired he was for the same skills in both – for his diplomatic talent and interests in the game-world every bit as much as technical skills in the 'real' world of diplomacy.” This kind of eulogy makes a good bit of sense, given the principles of Cicero in particular. Smith's talent for diplomacy is framed as evidence of his strong bearing no matter where he performed a particular role. *The New York Times* wrote in its eulogy for Smith, “He was widely known for using his diplomacy skills to moderate online conflicts.” Intriguingly, this occurrence wasn't unique in *EVE Online*: “It wasn’t the first time a gamer in Eve died in real life, and there was some
hesitancy to treat Smith’s death differently from others. But the pilots of Eve knew this was unique given the awful nature of the attack and Smith’s legendary status in the game. He was their greatest diplomat, online and off, and they would give him the send-off he deserved.”34 In this eulogy, a few items make the event noteworthy: the attack was “awful,” presumably unlike the other deaths of players in EVE. Furthermore, Smith is “legendary,” the “greatest diplomat” of EVE, deserving of a remarkable send-off (which he did, of course, receive). These outlets, in putting together Smith's online and offline diplomacy, highlight the central tenets of his character, building a posthumous ethos from his multi-faceted talents. Such a move seems fitting.

Another notable strategy for mourning Smith is to combine his many roles as evidence of his overall character. This differs slightly from the ancient conception of a consistent character (that of a diplomat), instead pointing to many various components that make up the character. In essence, Smith would necessarily be described by all the roles, as the sum of the roles would constitute his character. In nearly all eulogies, he is recognized for his diplomacy in both EVE Online and on behalf of the United States. One journalist frames the issue around his many roles, explaining, “Sean Smith, the foreign service information management officer who was killed with three others in an attack on an American consulate in Libya, wasn't just remembered Wednesday in the real world as a husband, father and 10-year veteran of the U.S. State Department, but also as an influential intergalactic diplomat in a sprawling virtual galaxy.”35 Here a spectrum of roles is recognized: Smith as a husband, Smith as a father, Smith as a State Department veteran, and Smith as an online diplomat. Here the eulogy speaks to a diversity of traits, much as the author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium advocates. His many virtues are extolled in another article, pointing to his diplomatic talent, helpfulness, warmness, and humor.36 These eulogies offer rich explanations of Smith's character, taking on different roles and showing different sides of the man. The various faces coalesce around the notion of “Sean Smith,” but they do so without coalescing around the central theme of “diplomat” as personal nature.
These forms of eulogy suggest that we are not at all distant from the forms of eulogy theorized by Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and others. The speaker must praise the subject in an appropriate or prudent manner. Rhetors still call upon an individual's actions to illustrate his or her virtues, usually as a person of good intent. Focusing on their best qualities, we praise the subject as a shining example others should be keen to follow. Recognizing that people today perform more roles in society, wearing more masks or acting in different contexts, ancient concepts of eulogy are flexible enough to explain the eulogistic practices we can witness as regards Sean Smith and Vile Rat. Depending on the audience, of course, one can find an anchor, a central character the audience is asked to honor. Be that central character Vile Rat or Sean Smith, the person's other roles are drawn in to point to a central, benevolent person looking to serve his country and the *EVE Online* universe. In this case, as is typically the case in eulogies, one's practices are treated not as sinister but as just. The exception, of course, is the article declaring Smith had “another life.” That article may seem odd because “another life” is typically used as connoting sinister motives, as in a “secret life.” The other articles, though, treat Smith's different roles as central to his being and as evidence for his virtue. For Smith, using his natural talent in multiple capacities is treated as honorable, much as an actor, poet, or even orator doing the same might be praised.

**Sean Smith, the public man**

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the mourning is that there is little in the way of questioning two of the central concepts offered in this thesis. In terms of public and private living, I cannot find any discourse critiquing the disclosure of Smith's online identity in his eulogies. Likewise, there is little discussion of appearance and reality, at least in terms similar to those used in discussing Colleen Lachowicz. For the public and private distinction, there seems to be something of an unstated premise. In the logic of the eulogies, Sean Smith is a public figure—a diplomat, through and through. For many,
the consistency of his character likely requires no distinction between public and private, since there is nothing shocking, offensive, or problematic about Smith's behavior. Essentially, the argument might suggest that because one's behavior in public and private is consistent, there is no need to protect his or her private affairs.

Comparing Lachowicz's situation with Smith's reveals an inconsistency in the treatment of public and private life. In the case of Colleen Lachowicz, gamers argue consistently that the affairs of *World of Warcraft* should be set aside from public behavior. Playing video games is leisure, a private activity as opposed to something to talk about in public. Such is not the case for Sean Smith/Vile Rat. For those celebrating the life of Sean Smith, his behavior in both the State Department and in *EVE Online* remains exemplary. In the discourse, there is nothing sinister about his behavior. Smith did serve as part of the Goons, a group known for debauchery and treachery, but his eulogies largely treat his online diplomacy as uniformly positive. The primary exceptions—a few posts in the memorial thread in the forum—are not of substance, especially since those posts mostly contain asides about the Goons after praising Vile Rat's leadership. There is scarcely a sense of discomfort about disclosing his affairs in *EVE Online* in public venues like a State Department eulogy or a New York Times article. More interestingly, there is no sense of discomfort in the words of the *EVE Online* gamers—they do not indicate uneasiness with a player's in-game actions being discussed in public venues.

One explanation for that lacking uneasiness concerns the nature of the comparison. In Lachowicz's case, the discourse was negative, filled with attacks on her personal character. On the other hand, with Sean Smith, the discourse is positive, filled with praise instead of blame. What is there to oppose in the way eulogies treat Smith? There is little to oppose if the central goal is assessing Smith's character. The audience is caught up in focusing on Smith's beneficial traits—his diplomacy, his friendship, and his service to community. Occasion does not call upon the audience (nor the rhetors crafting messages about Sean Smith) to assess the nature of video games, of appearance and reality.
The nature of the rhetorical exchange seems to be of great import here. A moment of deliberative rhetorical exchange would surely take into account a broad scope, as considering a range of topics will hopefully lead to better decisions. This is how the Maine GOP framed the attacks on Colleen's World. The Republican Party was simply providing information to voters tasked with making decisions about who to elect for office—knowing more would, in their eyes, lead to better decisions. Of course, gamers did not accept that line of reasoning, instead seeing the attacks as blaming unfairly gamers like Lachowicz.

Understanding these moments of mourning as eulogies narrows the focus of discourse in the case of Sean Smith/Vile Rat. Part of the epideictic tradition, the eulogy traditionally is not treated as an exploration of the complexities of human behavior. The central focus tends to be on praising the deceased. Aristotle couches his explanation of eulogy in the language of virtue and honor; the rhetor is expected to levy praise “that makes clear the great virtue [of the subject praised.]”\textsuperscript{40} The eulogy is designed to honor the fallen, not to create deliberation or determine whether he or she was guilty of some transgression. Within the constraints of this rhetorical situation, the appearance and reality of \textit{EVE Online} and the distinction of public and private behavior seems tangential. There is a sense that the offline world and \textit{EVE Online} need to somehow be connected, but there is little rhetoric devoted to teasing out those connections. Clinton's eulogy seems odd because there is a tension within it. Normally, eulogies would not cover the deceased's video game career, but \textit{EVE} was so central to Smith's character that it could not be neglected. Clinton moves forward by awkwardly connecting his service and family life with his diplomacy “in another world.”\textsuperscript{41} There is no more to the statement. There is no further discussion about how Clinton handled the situation. In the absence of discussion about the relationship between the game and the “real” world, the simplest explanation sufficed, but it did not come off as particularly artful. She praised Smith in every way possible—as the parameters of a eulogy would require—and left it there.
Another possible factor can be encapsulated in the phrase, “the political is personal.” Having served in the military and as a diplomat, Sean Smith rarely enjoyed a private civilian life. After serving in the Air Force, Smith served in Brussels, Baghdad, Pretoria, Montreal, and The Hague. Unlike Lachowicz, the discourse of Sean Smith/Vile Rat developed once Smith had already been in the public eye. Some might argue that his behaviors, as an established public official, were public acts. Indeed, in much of modern politics, there seems to be little sense that any actions are private if coming from a public figure. This line of reasoning might explain the attacks of Colleen's World, as well as the praising of Sean Smith. Perhaps when one is running for office, there might be some dispute about past actions and public discourse. In the case of Smith, though, his political life was ingrained deeply in his personal life. The blurred line of personal and political is oriented in the opposite fashion, starting with a political agent and trickling down to his personal behavior. As I noted in chapter two, Weintraub details a model of public and private which delineates “What is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals.” When the individual is a figure whose actions almost inherently affect the interests of the public, it is much more difficult to cordon off certain behaviors as “private.” The boundary, then, is difficult to establish for groups like politicians and service members.

The nature of *EVE Online* also merits consideration as a factor in the non-controversy of considering both Sean Smith and Vile Rat in memoriam. As is the case with offline affairs, different places provide different capacities of public and private communication. One might reasonably assume that posting on a Facebook timeline, where users’ faces are displayed, is a more public activity than communicating in a video game where users are represented through avatars or handles. *EVE Online*, though, is unique, even among video games. *EVE* is a serious game, wherein characters can die and not be revived. One author explains, “it’s geeky, but it’s also surprisingly influential and unique: a virtual world of geopolitical intrigue that attracts real-life spies, hackers and emissaries from across the
globe.”

And one of Smith/Vile Rat's friends, Alexander Gianturco, argues, “Eve is a mirror of real-world geopolitics…. Territory is scarce, resources are scarce, and there are massive wars of people fighting over them.” As regards death in the game, the permanent death of characters “is a radical departure from hit online games such as World of Warcraft, in which players can die and respawn without much consequence. By limiting itself to a one-game world and making losses permanent, Eve raises the stakes for gamers.”

EVE, in many ways, presents itself as closer to “reality” than “fantasy.” As an institution of “reality,” EVE may function as something much more like a public space than a private space, particularly because it operates in the realm of public affairs—of diplomacy and war—that so often characterizes the offline public sphere. As a game of politics, it feels real to its players. Celebrating a political figure for his actions in a political video game suddenly seems natural.

**Appearance and reality in diplomacy**

As with public and private, appearance and reality are not covered in great detail in the discourse surrounding Sean Smith. There are a few examples of comments about the reality of the game (the earlier mention of “silly game”), but most are silent on the subject. Again, there is an unstated premise, but it is not entirely clear what it is. It might be that the game is obviously not real and that the players are intensely cognizant of that fact. On the other hand, it is possible that the players believe strongly that the game is not so unreal, that it is a legitimate exercise in politics and interpersonal relationships. Journalists and others eulogizing Sean Smith likewise leave the question alone, only briefly touching on the subject with slightly loaded language (“another world” from Hillary Clinton). What is clear, though, is that the question lingers, even if many participants do not answer it. The relationship between the offline world and EVE Online is an important subject, particularly as rhetors attempt to craft language to reflect the values of appearance and reality. Much of the language about the separation between online and offline identity is situated, as part of conversations—implicit rather
than explicit, and often ambiguous.

The language of “virtual” often carries with it connotations of unreality. Clinton notes, “in the virtual worlds Sean helped create, he is also being mourned.” While her remarks mostly seem awkward, the term “virtual” evokes imagery of simulation, of activities which are not of import to the “real” world. One might use a term like “virtually” to mean “almost,” or “very close to,” but it is never the thing in reality. The same might be said of the use of “virtual” here. A journalist remarks that Smith was “an influential intergalactic diplomat in a sprawling virtual galaxy.” Humanity has not yet realized the imagery of science fiction and filled the galaxy with earth-made machines. Terms like “intergalactic” and “galaxy” signal the markers of science fiction. Adding “virtual” to those already unreachable terms emphasizes the simulated, unreal nature of EVE Online. As real as it may seem to some, EVE’s vast expanses are untenable. Even Vile Rat’s close friends, for example, Mark Heard, use the term “virtual” to establish something of a hierarchy. Heard ties “virtual” to a rare concrete statement about the game, claiming, “I believe everyone realizes that real life takes priority over anything in the virtual world.” Heard’s testimony lends credence to the position that EVE is so obviously fantasy that the discourse largely goes unsaid. The term “virtual” here is particularly powerful, creating hierarchy through the common position that the digital is separate from the corporeal. When placed against the term “real,” the distinction is clear: the offline world is most important, and the digital world is subordinate.

Two cases complicate the discourse, in ever-so-slight ways. In a thread on the article posted by The Mittani, Kalani K. Hausman tells Smith’s wife, “Your husband's impact to others in both physical and virtual worlds speaks volumes to his strength of character and quality as a magnificent human being.” Hausman changes the language slightly; by using the term “physical” instead of “real,”
using “physical” stands out as purposeful language. By using this language, Hausman suggests that what happens online is just as important as what happens offline. Likewise, Anne Collier seems to challenge the language of real/virtual in her article detailing Smith's death. She explains, “What struck me about the McClatchy story about Smith’s experience in both real and virtual worlds was how admired he was for the same skills in both – for his diplomatic talent and interests in the game-world every bit as much as technical skills in the 'real' world of diplomacy.” Collier compares his diplomatic skills in the State Department and in *EVE Online*, which is not uncommon in the discourse surrounding Smith. Yet, by placing the term “real” in quotation marks in the latter part of the sentence, she seems to challenge the notion that the offline actions of Smith were any less real than the online actions of Vile Rat. Her quotation marks clearly indicate a rejection of the standard narrative. The “real” world of diplomacy is not as real as it seems.

Captured through *EVE Online*, Sean Smith's final moments further blur the lines between online and offline, between appearance and reality. If *EVE* is thought of as “unreal” by some, the peculiar situation of Smith's death problematizes that unreality. Just before his death, Smith was playing *EVE Online* in the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi. As he communicated with the other players in the game, he noticed some strange events. At one point, he talked of the future and added, “assuming we don’t die tonight. We saw one of our 'police' that guard the compound taking pictures.” It was not the first time Smith had been in a difficult situation in his line of work, nor was it the first time he had communicated with others in such circumstances. One of his fellow players described that night,

(11:48:19 PM) zastrow: when VR was in baghdad he'd always come into illum and be like

(11:48:23 PM) zastrow: FUCK MORTARS

(11:48:31 PM) zastrow: SIRENS AGAIN GOD DAMMIT

(11:48:39 PM) zastrow: and we'd laugh and he'd always come back a few minutes later

(11:48:49 PM) zastrow: :(  

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In Iraq, Smith had described violence. For his fellow players, the Benghazi situation was unnerving, but not unprecedented. Later in the night, Smith sent messages including “FUCK” and “GUNFIRE” before signing off. While the other players learned of his death through news outlets, along with the rest of the world, his fellow gamers were the first to know of potential trouble. In sending these messages and having constant communication with his fellow gamers during the crisis, Smith brought a strong touch of the offline world to *EVE Online*. Unlike *EVE*’s occasional offline meetings, though, this particular touch of “reality” came with a dose of political tension and the potential for physical harm. For those who remarked upon the nature of Smith's death, the gravity of the situation was only heightened by the messages he sent on the night of the attacks. Reality came closer to home as other players chatted with Vile Rat that night.

The diplomatic intrigue of *EVE Online* met swiftly the diplomatic intrigue and political controversy of the U.S. State Department. Notes one author, “In addition to being memorialized in news pages and broadcasts across the world, Sean Smith became an unlikely lightning rod of outrage.” Following Smith's death, the Benghazi attacks became a point of contention for many conservatives who believed that the attacks were a conspiracy of some sort. Glenn Beck accused Smith of being a CIA operative in Benghazi. *Wired State*, a blog website, posted an article questioning, “Are Sean Smith's last words in game chat indication of a planned attack in Benghazi?” The author brings *EVE Online* into the conversation as part of a government conspiracy. The game, in this case, becomes a central part of the “real” problems in Benghazi. The author notes, “*EVE* is an intricate game of strategy and deceit whose developer once said with a twinkle in his eye at a conference I attended at New York Law School on virtual worlds and games, 'We make fraud fun.'” The author also questions “why Sean Smith was playing *EVE Online* or at least chatting to *EVE* buddies at work -- even if not during work hours -- and chatting about security matters.” The author finally makes a bizarre claim about the game:
It's clear that Sean Smith was inured to danger, and his game buddies even bragged about how he told them of his dangerous assignments, which added to his allure -- it's typical in these anonymous virtual scenes that people use the coin of real life or "RL" as it is known to trump game-acquired skills and amplify them. Through the acceleration and amplification of virtuality, somebody who is an information officer can become Kissinger or Brahimi.  

The insinuation here is that Smith was actually a plant for the State Department (or CIA if you ask Glenn Beck) who helped to fan the media flames by talking about the attacks within the game. In the strangest part of the death of Sean Smith, *EVE Online* becomes, at least for some conservatives, a tool through which the United States government enacts fraud and treachery. Smith's death and his conversations in *EVE Online* are, for them, evidence of a conspiracy to fabricate an attack. *EVE*, then, is not so separate from the “real” world—it is a tool of politicians to shape world events.  

The nature of appearance and reality in the case of Sean Smith is not entirely clear. In some ways, the game is seen as clearly unreal, as part of a virtual world separate from the real world. Yet, some seek to remove the hierarchy and reinforce the importance and reality of the *EVE Online* world. Smith's death, as it played out within the game's chat system, brought reality closer to the game, influencing other players' perspectives about the egregiousness of his death. Still, some conservative thinkers, including Glenn Beck and a number of bloggers, saw that “real” death in *EVE Online* as a way to spread the propaganda of the Obama administration, covering up the Benghazi conspiracy. It is important to keep in mind that these discussions of appearance and reality in the discourse surrounding Smith are only a fraction of the conversation. Most of the conversation remained silent on the subject, perhaps only hinting at a position on the relationship between the offline world and *EVE*. Much like the distinction of public and private, the distinction of appearance and reality seems to have faded, particularly as the rhetorical situation demanded attention to the character of Smith, as opposed to the
situation. Like the discourse of Colleen's World, definite positions in terms of appearance/reality and public/private do not emerge. Unlike Colleen's World, though, there seems to be recognition that the priority should be honoring the legacy of Sean Smith/Vile Rat. The praise levied in mourning Sean Smith/Vile Rat is powerful, and it is final.

**Reflections**

Mourning for the death of Sean Smith/Vile Rat reveals surprisingly little contention about the apparent connection between offline identity and online identity. Given that the *EVE Online* community, like the *World of Warcraft* community, is defined by gaming and gamers, it is puzzling that the *EVE* community would so readily assent to both internal and external linking of Sean Smith and Vile Rat. In both the *EVE* community and in Hillary Clinton’s eulogy, a Ciceronian sensibility directs the discourse. For all parties involved, Smith’s *persona* and performances as Vile Rat were indicative of his underlying character. In nearly every sense of the term, Smith both was and was treated as a *vir bonus*, not unlike the great orator Cicero. The very classic understanding of identity here is noteworthy. As opposed to the case of Colleen Lachowicz, no voices advocated for a postmodern-type separation of identities. Convergence is, in this case, a foregone conclusion. Networks are overlapping—the state and the *EVE* community would not normally interact—but they do so without conflict. Both communities have come together over the death of Sean Smith, a fallen comrade to all. This universal praise for Smith suggests a very different situation than that of Lachowicz/Santiaga.

Neither network feels the need to advance a truth claim, because there is no need for hierarchy. Whereas the GOP and Lachowicz sought to establish superiority over each other, the *EVE* community and the State Department have no reason to compete. In the end, their messages are the same. There is no political motive for any party, except for the individuals advancing conspiracy theories about Benghazi. If the appearance/reality pair is used to reason about values, based on the claims of truth,
then it is clear that these networks share similar values: honor, duty, sacrifice, and service. Sean Smith and Vile Rat provided all of these elements to their respective communities, both in the digital *EVE* universe and in the offline locations of Iraq, Benghazi, and beyond. A truth is shared among the networks—and again, despite the prospects of postmodern identity, both networks seem confident that they can locate the “real” Sean Smith/Vile Rat. Sean Smith's efforts to bring a more serious, more "real" world to *EVE Online* will undoubtedly be remembered fondly by the community. Certainly, in the postmortem construction of Smith’s *ethos*, there seems much to celebrate of his life—and much to mourn of his death.

Figure 4-1 R.I.P. Vile Rat – From Cyno Vigil’s Tribute Video
Notes


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


10. Ibid, 4.

11. “R.I.P. Vile Rat.”

12. Ibid., 71.


17. Ibid., 19.

18. “The Sandbox” refers to the game universe, which is considered a sandbox game. Ibid., 8.
19. Ibid., 7.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.


31. “The Goons” also carries with it a notable connotation, as members of the military in various places around the world have been thought of as thugs or ruffians.


34. Kushner, “Vile Rat.”


36. Bartkewicz, “American Diplomat Sean Smith, Killed in Libya Protests, Is Mourned by His EVE Online Gaming Community.”


38. Thier, “A Look at The Diplomatic Skills of Sean Smith, AKA ‘Vile Rat.’”


41. Clinton, “Remarks on Sean Smith.”

42. Lang, “Sean Smith, ‘Vile Rat’ Of ‘EVE Online’ Fame, Was Remembered By Online Gamers After Libyan Attack.”

43. I refer here primarily to scandals involving public figures, such as Bill Clinton, Larry Craig, Anthony Weiner, etc.


45. An optimist might argue that the culture of scandal in the American public is a result of this cognizance, wherein citizens realize that what public officials do can have bearing on the public sphere as a whole. I am not an optimist in this case.

46. Kushner, “Vile Rat.”

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

50. Clinton, “Remarks on Sean Smith.”

51. Lang, “Sean Smith, ‘Vile Rat’ Of ‘EVE Online’ Fame, Was Remembered By Online Gamers After Libyan Attack.”

52. Xhagen, “A Tribute to Sean ‘Vile Rat’ Smith.”


55. The Mittani, “RIP: Vile Rat.”

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Mittani explains that EVE often has offline meetings to have discussions; many of the meetings occurred in Iceland, where EVE Online was created and is hosted. Ibid.

59. Kushner, “Vile Rat.”

60. Ibid.

61. Wired State is a fascinating website. Its subheader is a quotation by Guy Debord: “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” That the site's conservative writers would admire Debord's quotations is perplexing. See: “Are Sean Smith’s Last Words in Game Chat Indication of a Planned Attack in Benghazi?,” Wired State, September 16, 2012, http://3dblogger.typepad.com/wired_state/2012/09/are-sean-smiths-last-words-in-game-chat-indication-of-a-planned-attack-in-benghazi.html.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. This line of thinking is especially interesting when juxtaposed with Stahl’s assertion that citizens increasingly understand the military through the lens of video games. See: Roger Stahl, “Have You Played the War on Terror?,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 23, no. 2 (2006): 112–130.

Chapter 5

Revealing Snowden

In June 2013, Glenn Greenwald and other journalists at *The Guardian* released information on massive and potentially illegal surveillance in the United States and beyond. The leaker was a thirty-year-old former CIA employee and NSA contractor, Edward Snowden. Snowden's massive leaks will certainly be remembered for some time, as will the frenzy in the media and the political sphere following their publication in *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and elsewhere. While many U.S. media outlets, including the *New York Times*, refused to publish these leaks, many have considered Snowden a hero, including the editorial board of the *New York Times*. His bid to obtain asylum—which resulted in Snowden taking residence in Russia—caused a geopolitical stir and thrust Snowden himself into the center of the ordeal. The scene read something like a Tom Clancy spy novel, with dramatic moments maintaining public interest in what would become of Snowden following his choice to disclose classified NSA information. As Snowden himself became the center of conversation in the mass surveillance scandal, numerous media outlets dug into his personal history, presumably seeking information that might create a juicy story and attract large numbers of readers. One particular focus was on Snowden's online behavior, mostly conducted under a common username, TheTrue HOOHA. Journalists dug deep into the history of TheTrue HOOHA to find comments from Snowden ranging back to at least 2002, when he was eighteen years old.

While many media outlets ran stories about Snowden's online past, two stories from the technology news website *Ars Technica* became particularly controversial. Written by Joe Mullin, the articles focused strictly on comments Snowden made under the handle TheTrueHOOHA on the *Ars
Technica website, including its news articles, its Web forum, and its Internet relay chats (IRCs). As of December 2013, the first article has garnered some 1,309 comments and the second article has spurred some 558 additional comments. Among the two articles and the nearly 2,000 comments in response to them, there exists a massive breadth of discussion about personal privacy, data, journalism, classified information, and online identity. Because the discussion is largely self-contained within the Ars Technica community and thus is bounded easily, this discourse is particularly fruitful for analysis. As rhetorical exchanges, the articles and comment threads illuminate the shape of discourse about digital and offline identity, appearance and reality, and the place of journalism in contemporary society. As deliberative exchanges, the artifacts highlight various attitudes about society, intelligence-gathering, and the role of the individual in challenging systems of power. I proceed in this chapter by first contextualizing the rhetorical nature of these exchanges as forensic and epideictic discourse; next, I analyze the articles and comment threads as rhetorical artifacts; then, I turn to the literary construction of the Snowden privacy “techno-thriller;” and finally I consider the search for the “real” Snowden on Ars Technica. In total, the values of privacy and free speech create dramatic tension between those supporting Snowden and the journalists at Ars Technica. The journalists' search for the “real” Snowden is contested by those upholding cyber-cryptographic values of privacy.

**Contextualizing forensic and epideictic discourse**

The discourses of Colleen's World and Vile Rat were fairly well-defined in rhetorical terms. Colleen's World occupied something of a deliberative position, wherein rhetorical actors decided a course for the political future (in this case via election of a particular politician). That purpose of the rhetoric guided the development of the discussion. Similarly, the mourning of Sean Smith/Vile Rat exhibited the characteristics of epideictic discourse, celebrating the life of a person through eulogy. Embedded in that discourse was almost universal praise for Sean Smith/Vile Rat. Again, the rhetorical situation in
part dictated the shape of the discourse. In the case of Edward Snowden's online identity, the rhetorical dynamics of both forensic and epideictic discourse seem to come into play. On one hand, widespread discussion of Edward Snowden's guilt, fault, and potential punishment circulated constantly through media outlets in June 2013. Though the rhetoric was not delivered in a court room, it still took on many of the elements of court room deliberation. This is the starting point of Ars Technica's analysis of Snowden's online life. The first Ars Technica article opens by noting, “'Whistleblower or criminal?' asks the teaser on The New York Times’ Opinion page. It’s the question of the hour—speaking, of course, about Ed Snowden, whose leaks of top-secret documents from the National Security Agency (NSA) began dribbling out last week via two newspapers, The Guardian and The Washington Post.”

On the other hand, the answer to the question seems predicated not on judicial processes, but on processes created by cultural values—the same values that are levied or contested to generate praise and blame in epideictic speaking. Snowden's guilt or innocence would have more to do with one's perspective on whether the government has exceeded its intended role in intelligence-gathering. The rhetorical orientation is thus not immediately clear.

Upon closer reading, there is little doubt that the articles are specifically about Snowden and his identity. The articles do not wade into the territory of politics or of cultural values, instead focusing narrowly on what Snowden did and said under the TheTrueHOOHA handle. Importantly, Ars Technica's discourse about Snowden is not explicitly related to his leaks of NSA information. Snowden is certainly associated with the leaks (“NSA leaker Ed Snowden's life on Ars Technica” reads one of the headlines), but the exploration of his online identity is not tied to the action of leaking the information. Leaking classified information, a potentially criminal activity, would likely be tied to questions of stasis most associated with forensic discourse: did he indeed commit the acts, was he justified in doing so, and what should be the punishment? Meanwhile, on Ars Technica, the two articles in question seek not to judge Snowden's actions; instead, judgment of his overall character is
the focal point. The articles rest firmly within the realm of epideictic rhetoric in this sense.

*Ars Technica* implies that its enterprise is not in determining Snowden's guilt or innocence: “Whether Snowden is a hero or a traitor is a matter of opinion. But one thing that's become clear as a matter of fact in the past few hours is that Snowden was an active *Ars Technica* reader and poster in our forums.”

Mullin’s perspective is grounded in a question of fact—in this case, definitional *stasis*—generally tied to journalistic endeavors. The article suggests that its purpose is to separate *fact* from *fiction*, to get to the truth of the matter. Mullin creates through the opening paragraphs an *ethos* of objectivity. In that sense, the dynamics of praise and blame seem irrelevant. Yet, the evidence provided in the articles, and the arrangement and construction thereof, gives the appearance of attempting to judge Snowden's character. The articles are explorations of who Snowden was and is on *Ars Technica*. Subtly, the pieces create the foundations of praise and blame, set within the context of widespread deliberation about Snowden's guilt and justification in leaking the NSA documents. As part of a network of discussion, the articles serve in a partially forensic function, with Snowden's character called into question through these two rhetorical exchanges.

*Stasis* is especially valuable in the case of Snowden because there are multiple layers of discourse engaging multiple layers of subjectivity. In the cases of Lachowicz and Smith, the discourse was fundamentally about the person, with other issues remaining peripheral at best. In the case of Snowden, the former NSA agent is symbolic of the larger issue of state surveillance, fragmenting discourse into questions of both Snowden and the state. Nadeau explains of Hermagoras’ *stasis*, “Hermagoras prescribed four rational questions or stock issues, which can be paraphrased as follows: Is there a problem? What is the essence or the problem? How serious is the problem from the standpoint of its non-essential attributes and attendant circumstances? Should there be any formal action on the problem (and, if so, should it be undertaken by this particular agency)?”

Media outlets seem to engage more forensic *stases*. For media outlets discussing Snowden,
stasis tends to center on the definitional (in response to the second question), recognizing a problem, but wondering whether it is caused by impropriety on the state’s behalf or Snowden’s behalf. In contrast, those commenting on Mullin's articles largely engaged different *stases*, questioning not the facts of Snowden’s past, but the ethical values of online privacy, data collection, and government intelligence-gathering. Because *Ars Technica* is not a government agency, but instead an artifact of cultural production, it makes more sense to call engagement with the website part of an epideictic process. Still, many user comments tend to engage policy in a deliberative sense, calling to the government for certain actions. Using community as a heuristic, it might help to suggest that different communities or publics are being addressed, causing disruption in the comment threads.¹⁰ Many of these discourses tend to fall along deliberative *stases*, albeit retroactively judging the NSA’s policies: “(1) justice and legality of a proposal, (2) need for action on it, (3) practicability, and (4) additional considerations such as honor, satisfaction to be derived, and so on.”¹¹ What appears here, then, is symptomatic of a fundamental disconnect between the media spectacle of Edward Snowden and the citizen concern over the National Security Agency. What is especially interesting is that *Ars Technica* had contributed a large number of articles about government policy and the NSA, many of which seemed notably critical of the intelligence operations.¹² In these two cases, however, the sensationalist articles failed to engage the deliberative questions of domestic spying prominent in the minds of those commenting. By focusing exclusively on Snowden's character, the articles stood out as potentially inappropriate and shifted the most important questions of the deliberation.

**Article one: NSA leaker Ed Snowden's life on *Ars Technica***

Mullin's first task in his article is to justify the claim that *Ars Technica* knows Snowden's forum handle. Mullin explains, “His username, 'The True HOOHA,' was revealed in a profile of Snowden published by Reuters earlier today. That was the name he used on an anime site, which corresponds to the *Ars
Early in the article, Mullin has already absolved *Ars Technica* of much of the responsibility of finding Snowden's user name. In essence, the article is crafted to suggest the data was gathered by others—and that *Ars Technica* is just applying that data to find Snowden's profile on its own forums. The article explains that *Ars Technica* has taken the information from another, legitimate journalistic source, Reuters. To strengthen the case that the user was in fact Snowden, Mullin creates a time line to help contextualize the posts. He details, “The user who appears to be Snowden registered with Ars in 2001. At that time, Snowden would have been just 17.” The implication appears to be that Snowden, being a tech-savvy teenager, was likely to be on a Web forum like *Ars Technica*. The article further notes that his first post was about setting up his own Web server, a request again highlighting his technological orientation. Already, Snowden's character is set up through these exchanges: Snowden enjoys anime, is part of the Internet generation, and has been advanced in technology for quite some time. *Ars Technica* being a tech website, this kind of information might build some identification with the audience. Readers presumably would be interested in knowing Snowden shares interests with them.

Mullin continues matching identifying information between Snowden and TheTrueHOOHA, reinforcing that the identities are one and the same. He continues, “Posts made by that username indicate the user is male and the same age as Snowden (22 in 2006), has the same educational background (no high school degree), and has worked for the government in an IT capacity.” Next he mentions Snowden's time abroad and corresponding posts, for example, TheTrueHOOHA’s mention of being in Geneva in 2007, a time when Snowden was confirmed to be in that area. Finally, Mullin notes that Snowden concluded posting in 2012. One might assume that the author was curious about whether Snowden posted on *Ars Technica* during or after the leaks, but he clearly answers that question in the negative. Having sufficiently proven that TheTrueHOOHA was an account belonging to the NSA leaker, Mullin details the topics of Snowden's posts covered in the article: gaming, anime, and his sex
The collection of topics is especially odd. In the midst of the NSA scandal, this article instead broaches very personal topics. The intimate details of Snowden's life, paired with these strange categories, seem somewhat irrelevant to the wider discussion of government spying and intelligence policy. The article is set up to investigate and perhaps judge Snowden's character, not through the context of whistleblowing, but through identification as a seemingly typical Internet forum user.

The rest of the article is rather disorganized, seemingly thrown together very quickly. A subtitle reads, “Snowden on agnosticism, anime, gaming, guns, and government.” Large blocks are quoted from TheTrueHOOHA account, but placed under the name “Snowden.” In this sense, Mullin portrays the forum account through the offline person of Edward Snowden. Identity is dominated early in the piece by the corporeal existence of Edward Snowden. This might seem especially obvious, given that Snowden is the person of interest in the NSA leaks, a suddenly famous figure across the United States and even around the world. By placing the forum comments within the domain of Edward Snowden as a person, though, Mullin ties his comments made under TheTrueHOOHA to Snowden's current character. There is no consideration as to whether these posts are actually reflective of Snowden's perspective or behaviors. Later in the article, though, Mullin shifts the identity, including both: “At one point in 2006, Snowden/HOOHA joked about how one user's Xbox 360 is 'NSA's new surveillance program.' The strange clicking noise that another Ars user heard coming from his console? 'That's the sound of freedom, citizen!'” Mullin later refers specifically to TheTrueHOOHA, giving yet another very late indication that there is more depth to the situation than Snowden simply talking on the forum through a user handle.

The most important element of the first article is its assertions of “fact,” creating its ethos through the rhetorical tones of journalism, devoid of commentary—“just the facts,” perhaps. The copious direct quotations serve as windows into Snowden's behaviors on the Ars Technica forums. After the brief introductory section, Mullin does little in the way of writing, instead letting the forum
posts dominate the article. The article is essentially an organization and reproduction of the posts, which is peculiar since its organization is poor and its aesthetics are lacking severely. The article is unappealing and hasty, but it retains an aura of objectivity. It digs into Snowden's past without apology. For Mullin, Snowden/TheTrueHOOHA is fair game for a journalist, his posts perhaps indicating some interesting tidbits about his personality. There is no judgment of Snowden as a “hero or a traitor.” Mullin even reaches out to Snowden at the end of the article, noting, “Mr. Snowden, if you're reading this—we'd love to reconnect. Ars readers would have a special interest in hearing from you. Drop me a line.”

Perhaps the line is in jest. Still, there seems to be belief that the article is not doing anything wrong, that Snowden would not object to this kind of exposition on his online identity. The article seems confident in its objective. The same cannot be said of user responses to the piece.

**The user hell storm**

More than 1,300 comments spread some thirty three pages of the comment thread on the first article. The comment section suggests this is one of the most controversial articles ever posted on *Ars Technica*, at least in terms of the responses elicited. User daropi provides the first comment, also one of the most popular comments: “This is a bit...creepy?” This first comment sets the tone for much of the discussion, wherein hundreds of users question the ethics of digging up Snowden's forum posts, largely on the basis of privacy concerns. killing_time adds, “creepy. i find what he did interesting and i appreciate it. what he was into in high school and posted online anonymously is none of my business.”

A few common *topoi* emerge throughout the comments, constituting distinct but related parts of the discussion. First, the protection of anonymity is a frequent topic in the comments. Additionally, the language of “outing” is used. Finally, Mullin's article is seated within the context of the NSA scandal, bringing the cultural dynamics of *Ars Technica*’s reporting into a deliberative discussion about intelligence-gathering and spying. In response, Joe Mullin and other *Ars Technica*
writers argue that the information is public and that the article was created without invasive techniques.

In addition to killing_time's comment about anonymous high school posting, others comment on anonymity, implying that *Ars Technica* has violated something of a sacred principle. User ducansil questions, “So much for username anonymity?” ghost55 adds, “This is going a bit too far. Dredging up shit he said as an anonymous user over ten years ago? Really?” Users generally seem incredulous that *Ars Technica* would write such a piece. Perhaps it seems to be out of character for the site, which generally produces high-quality, in-depth articles about technology news. For many users, the most important part of the article was not the article itself, but the comments. Zanshin quotes The_Mighty_Squid, who points out that the “real story is in the comments which few will read,” arguing,

> I just had the same thoughts, that the real interesting discussion is here, in the comments. I personally have chosen to just use a pseudonym, and I probably talk a bit more freely than I would if I had to use my real name, but I do post with the thought in the back of my mind that one day I might be held accountable IRL [in real life] for the things I say here. I wouldn't change that, and am not willing to take more effort to remain more anonymous, as a pseudonym is my level of caring about my privacy here.

These comments together suggest that users seek some level of privacy on the forums. That level is certainly above the privacy given to Snowden following his leaks. The users expect that the site will not exploit their data to such an extent. Ephemeron puts it this way: “It seems that many posters, myself included, perceive some kind of social contract between your organization and us. No, it's not one that's codified. And yes, it is one that exists despite technical realities that we are not anonymous (we know that). You've broken the contract by dragging the undergarments of your own member--part of a community--into the limelight.” While the users may not expect complete anonymity, since *Ars Technica* is a website accessible by the general public, users like Ephemeron expect that the site will
not go out of its way to violate an unspoken contract. Rhetorically, this perspective on privacy takes the form of the market distinction made by Weintraub; one's private behaviors, conducted in the realm of business and contracts, are not expected to become part of the public sphere. Anonymity is, by nature, something of a cultural good on the Web, expected by the site's users when dealing with *Ars Technica* itself.

User comments are not unanimous as regards privacy and anonymity. A number of users support Mullin's article, advancing a notion of privacy as impossible on the Web. ProphetM quotes Control Group, who laments, “privacy, of course, is easily stripped away (obscurity is not security, after all) when a high-profile spotlight is shone upon a specific user. Seeing that happen brings into sharp relief how vulnerable each of us would be to exactly the same thing.” S/he responds by arguing, “You can't strip away something that never existed. Just like you don't say things that you don't want anyone to hear, you don't post things that you don't want anyone to read.” For ProphetM, the cyberutopia of privacy and anonymity is nothing but a pipe dream. Certainly, privacy in modern society is rare. On the general level of panopticism, an expectation of privacy is questionable at best. Technologically, as a number of users point out, maintaining anonymity and privacy is a nigh impossible task. NinjaNerd56 postulates,

> The second the first packet left your local network and transited the upstream node from you, any expectation of privacy or anonymity effectively ceased. That's the way it is, Mr. Cronkite. I have an interesting job that frequently (daily) lets me 'see' deep into network data from all over the planet. No, I don't have any connection to the government or military; in fact, "they" are not fans of yours truly in the least. The point is, you click or hit Enter, you're running naked. Don't kid yourself it's otherwise.

The term “packet” refers to data being sent to and from users, servers, and the website. NinjaNerd56's comment highlights the ability of many eyes across the world to access all sorts of Internet data at a
moment's notice. For him/her and dozens of other posters, technology has made it incredibly easy to track down someone's online presence. Even the NSA's data-gathering capabilities provide solid evidence for such a claim.

The language of “outing” pervades the comment thread, giving special weight to claims about privacy in the discussion. PaulWTAMU declares, “This is kind of disquieting to see *Ars Technica* outing users like this. Not happy with them. I'm sure there's other celebrity and government officials that use this site and this might make them rethink it.”29 Here the slant is clear: outing users is a problem. On the other hand, *Ars Technica*’s Creative Director Aurich Lawson also uses the language of outing, explaining, “He was outed as an Arsian.”30 Lawson may likewise see outing as a problem, but from his perspective, it was not *Ars Technica* that did the outing. Instead, other websites revealed his credentials first. For Lawson, writing the article is not improper on *Ars Technica*’s part, since they were not the ones doing the outing. User deedeeram1 links the concept of outing to consent, concluding, “Unless someone can point to a post from Snowden somewhere on the internet saying something like 'Hey internetz, check out the email address I used to register at *Ars Technica*’, the fact remains that *Ars Technica* outed a user's registration details in this story. Nice.”31 Without his consent, then, *Ars Technica* was in the wrong, at least in the eyes of deedeeram1. Obviously, the language of outing is closely related to other situations—namely the outing of those in the LGBTQ community. The rhetorical dimensions of outing, remaining private, and passing are at play here.32 If being an *Ars Technica* user is something one might want to keep private (hence the comments about anonymity and pseudonymity), violating that privacy endangers the user.

Users throughout the comment thread tie the *Ars Technica* piece outing Snowden to the privacy invasions exposed by Snowden's leaks. Thermodynamics questions, “Isn't the ability to go searching through a person's entire internet history kinda what he is fighting against? I mean, we all realize that stuff is out there forever, but I agree...creepy.”33 By comparing the NSA’s government data mining to
Ars Technica’s internal data collection and searching, users like Thermodynamics see Mullin's article as ironic. The language of “creepy” tends to convey that position. Shavano links Ars' actions to the government, condemning cultural practices of data privacy: “What you wrote clearly indicates that Mr. Snowden did not give you permission to publish the real name associated with his account. So what you did here is really shitty. I get that we can't trust the government. Apparently we can't trust Ars editors either.”

Shavano’s claims about trust in both the government and the editors at Ars Technica call into question the ethics of authority figures in the digital era. Users like Thermodynamics and Shavano appear to identify strongly with Snowden's efforts to erode that power to control and manipulate data, turning their anger toward the government to the editors at Ars Technica. rmm200 takes the relationship a step further, wondering whether the government in fact had a hand in the article:

My post was neutral on Ars outing Snowden, but I also forgot my primary rule. After a leak like this, a primary goal of our security services is to discredit the leaker, like pictures of a pole dancing girlfriend. So the first assumption on any article about Mr. Snowden had to be that our security services placed it. It is just what they do. Maybe true in this case, maybe not. But keep it in mind.

Mullin’s article seemingly sowed seeds of distrust for many users. By violating what the users expect to be private information, especially in light of Snowden's leaks about private information and government surveillance, the Ars Technica staff is portrayed as part of the problem, dramatically linked through the acts of mining and abusing personal data.

The Ars Technica staff certainly did not see the article in such a fashion, nor did a number of users supporting the staff. Mullin himself was the first Ars Technica staff member to comment on the article, contending, “His username was anonymous. We had to piece it together & confirm the details like anyone else. We did publish the email his username was registered with because it had already
been made public.” Mullin crafts his argument around the method by which *Ars Technica* collected and pieced together the information. The post indicates there was no abuse of the site's position as regards the data—they pieced it together, just as every journalist out there would have done. Aurich Lawson responds in great detail,

So it's fine for the rest of the world to discuss this, be it the thread in the Lounge already, or Buzzfeed or Reuters or the rest of the mainstream media if the inquiries we've gotten mean anything, but we should be quiet about it? How does that make any sense? I would find it utterly bizarre to find out all these places are talking about Ars, and yet there was no place here for the discussion, where we actually understand things.

This is the reality of posting in a public forum, your posts are … public. I happen to post under my real name, and always have, but you should never assume a pseudonym is going to protect you, anything you write can come back to you.

The cat is out of the bag, sorry, sticking our heads in the sand and pretending the rest of the world doesn't know sounds asinine.

The primary line of argumentation is that other media outlets are making similar stories and that *Ars Technica* should feel free to follow suit, especially since the information is in the site's back yard, so to speak. For Mullin, Lawson, and other *Ars Technica* writers responding in the comments, Snowden's posts were made in a public venue and located by public groups (media outlets); thus, the expectation of privacy is unreasonable. This reasoning follows the notion that there is no such thing as privacy online—at least not in the sense that a pseudonym would protect the users. For the *Ars Technica* writers, Snowden's identity can and should be attached to TheTrueHOOHA, as it is merely a pseudonym, as opposed to a separate performance of identity.
Mullin's second article moves in a different direction, adding intrigue and length to the piece. As opposed to the first article, which all fit on a single page, the second article takes up three pages of text and images. The article's title immediately sets up a dramatic scenario and calls into question Snowden's character: “In 2009, Ed Snowden said leakers 'should be shot.' Then he became one.” It also opens with a picture very different from the generic photographs from the first article. The image takes on a stylized appearance, clearly made using photo manipulation software to juxtapose Snowden's face, text, and a peculiar sort of hashed imagery:

![Figure 5-1. Ars Technica’s TheTrueHOOHA Header](image)

From the top of the second article, published some two weeks after the first, the style is quite apparently different. The article does not seem thrown together—it is not void of pleasant aesthetics or of thought-out organization. Narrative drives the second article, not just in a temporal sense, but in being constructed more like a work of fiction than a simple newspaper article. Together, these elements create an air of intrigue, conforming to elements of the techno-thriller genre of fiction. Embedded in the story are notions of spying, government power, and one man's plight to find himself in an online world. Mullin's different tack in the second article creates a new rhetorical dimension to the story, still falling within the epideictic genre for the most part, particularly through epideictic rhetoric's close
relationship with fictional works. Culture is explored through the dramatic lens of the techno-thriller story, working closer to the realm of the techno-interested readers at *Ars Technica*.

The opening section of the second article is much longer than that of the first, and it contains logs from an Internet relay chat (IRC) showing TheTrueHOOHA’s comments. The opening section sets the scene of a techno-thriller in clear terms. Mullin recounts, “Hired by the CIA and granted a diplomatic cover, he was a regular old IT guy whose life was elevated by a hint of international intrigue.” The article portrays Snowden as something of an undercover operative and even uses the language of “intrigue” to describe the scenario. This time around, Mullin takes that narrative and sets up the current situation with the NSA leaks, describing Snowden's acceptance of a job contracting for the NSA, his move to Hong Kong, and his revelation that “there was a dragnet government surveillance program collecting information on every American's phone calls.” By seating the article in the context of the NSA scandal, Mullin widens the scope of the discourse both in the article and in the comments. Moving out of the realm of “just the facts,” the narrativization of Snowden's past on *Ars Technica* creates room for deliberation about the values of government, society, and journalism. More importantly, it creates room for entertainment in the midst of crisis.

Mullin gives life to a contradiction about Snowden through the article. He claims, “In his public statements, Snowden is smooth and uncompromising, radiating intelligence. Snowden has insisted the focus remain on the leaked documents, not him. But he has also kept himself in the spotlight, speaking to three newspapers, doing live Q&As, and dribbling out more documents over time.” Using the term “but” here is vital. Mullin has set up Snowden as an intelligent figure, claiming to not want attention, yet continuing to put himself in the spotlight. Snowden is thus crafted as manipulative, hogging the spotlight in the name of helping the public good. On multiple occasions, the article points to Snowden's behavior in a way that makes the reader question his righteousness. Referring to Snowden, Mullin declares, “He saw himself as a paladin of the markets, bringing
'liquidity' to all. As for those who didn't agree with him about the rightness of the gold standard or the need to eliminate Social Security, they weren't just mistaken—they were 'retards.' Mullin's selections call into question Snowden's character, moving beyond the mundane chats of the first article and into the realm of hypocrisy in the second submission. Snowden is the anti-hero of the story, much like the questionable protagonists of many techno-thriller stories.

The article's third page is devoted largely to pointing out Snowden's contradictions as regards national security. Notes the author, “Snowden may have leaned libertarian on some issues, but he also exhibited strong support for America's security state apparatus. He didn't just work for it as a quiet dissident. Four years before he would leak the country's secrets, Snowden was cheering its actions and insisting that it needed healthy funding. To anyone who questioned US actions in his favored online hangout, he could be derisive.” The reader is left to ponder how so much might have changed over the course of a few years. Might it be that Snowden really wanted his fifteen minutes of fame, as Mullin seems to imply? The article continues, “The Snowden seen in these chats is not the man we see today. Snowden clearly had to cross some kind of personal Rubicon in order to leave his life behind. His chats reveal his strident beliefs in individualism and a generally libertarian aesthetic, but they also showed real support for the security state.” Mullin's narrative continues throughout the years, attempting to bring the reader to today's situation. He eventually connects the past and the present, using the techno-thriller intrigue of the past to raise questions about today. Mullin details recent Snowden interviews in which the accused leaker explains his change over the years, becoming disillusioned throughout his time abroad, hoping in vain that President Obama might bring some reform to the intelligence community. The contradictions are not explained fully, but they are resolved partially, as the narrative time lines converge on the present day.
The last section of the second article is worth note, as it provides *Ars Technica* user perspectives on the ordeal, particularly as regards TheTrueHOOHA. In following the tone of the rest of the article, the last section slants against Snowden, quoting users who were not so fond of TheTrueHOOHA. Mullin quotes one user, andyfatbastard, as saying, “I remember that guy... He was kind of a dick. But fair play to him for what he's done.”47 Another user, unnamed in the article, remarked, “He was a total cockmonger.”48 By including these user comments, Mullin seems to breed further disdain for Snowden/TheTrueHOOHA. Already, the article frames Snowden as an irritating, libertarian, attention-seeking hypocrite. As is the case in the rest of the article, some text is culled to the side, placed in bright, attention-grabbing text bubbles. The final text bubble leaves the article on a sour note, highlighting Snowden's right-leaning perspective: “See, that's why I'm goddamned glad for the second amendment. Me and all my lunatic, gun-toting NRA compatriots would be on the steps of congress before the C-SPAN feed finished.”49 Juxtaposed with the user comments about TheTrueHOOHA, this text bubble reinforces disdain for him.

Because the article is written in an engaging narrative style, complete with interesting images, text bubbles, and an appealing aesthetic, it appears to have more value as a techno-thriller story than as a legitimate journalistic endeavor. *Ars Technica*’s coverage here blurs the lines between fictionalization and journalism. Since the values explored in the story are so complex, the techno-thriller narrative helps the author evade some of the serious attacks against the enterprise as a whole. In taking this approach, Mullin follows a trend of converging media forms not unlike the convergence explained by Goodnight in 1995. For Goodnight, the popularity of fictional works like *The Firm* and *Jurassic Park* signaled a convergence of knowledge creation, particularly on university campuses. Media forms blurred; “the strategic interplay among these novels and films exploit aesthetic spaces of postmodernity so as to converge epistemic differences among media. The net result is the playful reductions of public life for an emergent generation.”50 The same could certainly be said of *Ars Technica*’s article on
Snowden. Taking a playful tone, grounded in a fiction-like composition, the article is able to tackle stases not just of fact, but also of value and policy. Mullin is able to wade into issues of the public sphere, bringing forward the personal values and life of Edward Snowden. More carefully constructed than the previous article, this second article still avoids the questions of privacy, perhaps hoping that the narrative will obscure any ethical quandaries. Judging by the user comments, the strategy seems to have worked, at least in part.

**Community conflicted**

The comments on the second article suggest users are much more amenable to Mullin's revised technique. If the system of upvoting and downvoting is any indication, users calling the second article “creepy” or making similar statements were not favored by other users. The first comment, which simply reads, “Shame,” received some 58 upvotes and 93 downvotes, also earning a moderator intervention to hide the post, captioned with “Substance-free trolling.” The next comment, by Aidolon, reads, “I understand this is a publicly-accessibly IRC channel, but wow... This article is more than a little creepy. Leaves a bad taste in my mouth, Ars.” Again, though, this comment is not particularly popular, earning 193 upvotes and 180 downvotes, suggesting that the community is rather split on the opinion advanced by Aidolon. As a whole, the community or *Ars Technica* readers seems conflicted as to whether the article is relevant and fair; about half of the comments are similar to most of those from the first article, while the other half either declare the article relevant or engage the concepts from the article on their own terms.

Comments railing against the article vary widely in their subject matter and in their acceptance of Mullin's writing. Many of the comments are downvoted significantly, with overall scores including -48 (27 upvotes and 75 downvotes) and -16. Others, such as doppio's comment, “Journalism. /s” (/s meaning sarcasm), are upvoted significantly, with that comment receiving a total score of 111.
tripledes continues on the conspiracy bandwagon started by some in the first comment thread, claiming that *Ars Technica* might be “complicit” and providing three “lessons” for users:

Lesson #1: Do not trust Ars! It's too hard to resist the media-whoredom. Your data is being saved and can be compiled and published if it creates an story. The NSA didn't even ask, yet here it all is.

Lesson #2: Stop being so "social" on the internet. Too many eyes, too many hard drives. Your opinions will come back to haunt you.

Lesson #3: Practice anonymity. Never use the same username or handle anywhere. Make the dots very hard to connect. Got nothing to hide? Who cares, "they" will still look in your underwear drawer if they can.  

Again, privacy and anonymity are prominent parts of the discussion. For those with reservations about the article, *Ars Technica* has still violated some sort of contract with its users. tripledes argues that users should not trust the *Ars Technica* website in the first place, as it is collecting user data. The tone is certainly one of paranoia, fed by the perceived sleight on the part of Mullin and the *Ars Technica* staff. dfiler argues, “It is unfortunate that Ars is still focusing on Snowden rather than the NSA's surveillance programs he revealed.” For a number of reasons, these users disagree with the publication of the second article. Some of the reasons revolve around issues of privacy, but the most popular anti-article comments critique the article's place as journalism and Mullin's decision to focus on Snowden as opposed to the NSA controversy. Perhaps the first discussion's emphasis on privacy covered most of what readers wanted to say in response, opening space for new critiques of the article. It is equally plausible that the article's different appearance contributed to the changing attitudes among users. By being constructed in a more professional manner, readers may have more readily assented to its credibility.

The comment section on the second article provides a distinct *topos*, tied directly to the content
of the article. Many of the comments focus on Snowden's changing behavior over the years—the central part of the narrative advanced by Mullin. Pulled into the intrigue of the blurred narrative, users might be responding to a more entertaining, interesting, and perhaps more relevant question.

vampireaquid remarks, “Excellent story. I'm not really surprised that Snowden once hated leakers and then became one. I think people like him often become whistleblowers because they are disillusioned. He sounded like a true believer who eventually saw or learned something that was too much for him to accept.” The discourse has shifted away from the ethics of publishing the story, instead engaging the central question of Snowden's character. The story is “excellent” in vampirequid's opinion. User nimro is even more direct in admiring the article:

> In contrast to my feelings about previous articles about Snowden's life and online activities, I find this one in much better taste. For the most part (especially page 3) you've stuck to a narrative which is framing this man's leaking with his previous opinions on that topic.
>
> This article feels a lot more like the sort of real, useful journalism I'd expect from Ars and a lot less like the trashy tabloid nature of the girlfriend and forum posts pieces.
>
> Thank you, Mr. Mullin, for this article.

It is telling that the forum users have picked up on Mullin’s focus on Snowden’s narrative. The story is so obviously different in its construction that some users like nimro accept Mullin's narrative in the second article after fervently opposing privacy violations in previous, similar articles. The care taken to craft the narrative has pulled the discourse away from questions of privacy, shifting the discussion to the changes in Snowden's identity. Users have come to focus on a *topos* still central to this thesis: who is the real Edward Snowden?
Finding the “real” Snowden

While most of the discussion in the first article and its comments revolved around privacy and Ars' social contract with users, the second article brought forth appearance and reality as a vital topic. In tying with the theme of the techno-thriller, secrecy and disclosure are key devices in advancing the plot. One user, quoted by Mullin in the second article, guided discussion around a basic statement: “Edward Snowden == TheTrueHOOHA.” The users Mullin quotes in the second article seem to acknowledge Snowden as TheTrueHOOHA, without any separation between the two identity markers. Throughout the second article and its comments, the discussion addresses two distinct audiences for which appearance and reality would matter most: the general public, as regards the NSA leaks; and the Ars Technica public, users who may have known Snowden or who might be impacted by the practices of privacy and reality on the site. Both audiences are addressed in the discourse, highlighted by Aurich Lawson's comment in the first thread about other communities and media outlets paying attention to Ars Technica's developing story.

Mullin's musings about Snowden's seeming hypocrisy illuminate a point of contention for the public beyond Ars Technica readers: which Snowden is the real Snowden, and should trust be placed in today's Snowden and his NSA leaks? Mullin argues, “The chat logs are the most detailed view available into the formation of a man who has been hailed as a hero, and condemned as a traitor by leaders in his own country.” In this sense, comments made under TheTrueHOOHA allow a window into the reality behind the appearance of Snowden, the man who is “smooth and uncompromising, radiating intelligence.” Mullin links the Snowden of the past with the Snowden of today, not just through time, but through his inner-most identity: “Four years ago, Snowden presented an image of always being sure of himself, sometimes to the point of seeming arrogant. He often thought he was the smartest guy in the room, and he let others know it.” The intelligent, confident man appearing on the news is the same man of four years ago, perhaps only slightly different in his portrayal of arrogance.
User mr_pookie explains the need to understand just who Snowden was and is: “His motivations are important for the major media outlets. I’d like to know if he is just a fame-whore who targeted a fishy looking top secret project? OR was he justly working towards uncovering the constitutional crime of the century(s)?”62 In a forensic sense, as part of the larger discourse, uncovering the “real” Snowden is helpful in judging his guilt in the NSA leaks. Whether he should be praised as a hero or blamed as a traitor is not a mere epideictic gesture, but one of great legal import.

_Ars Technica_ users also have at stake knowledge of a person who walked among them, so to speak. Mullin’s inclusion of user comments about Snowden points to an internal utility of the discussion. The section containing those comments is entitled “I remember that guy,” bringing the memory of Snowden as a forum user to current users' minds. The author links to a thread on the _Ars Technica_ forums, “Edward Snowden – NSA Leaker and Arsian,” reminding users that this story is of interest to their community.63 The complexity of Snowden's character, coupled with the fact that so many users seemed to dislike him, creates a difficult situation for a writer addressing Snowden’s online life, especially when that writer is part of the very same _Ars Technica_ community. By tapping into user perspectives, Mullin reminds users that they have access to a “real” Edward Snowden not seen by the outside world until now. The “real” Snowden is the Snowden many of them have known for years, not the Snowden manufactured by the media following the NSA leaks controversy.

Still, it is questionable to the users whether TheTrueHOOHA of the IRCs in #arsificial was even the “real” Snowden at all. dracusoara articulates a counter-argument, noting, “#arsificial has a giant warning when you log in that states that the channel is unmoderated and not to take any complaints from there to any of the mods. Taking logs from there is like an alien coming down and taking pictures at a mental institution of people flinging shit about, then using that 'evidence' to show that humans need to be exterminated.”64 One comment by user agonist might come across as a joke, but it likewise calls into question the “reality” of the Snowden being reported: “His comments designed to ensure that the
NSA would trust him completely. I was all part of the plan.”

Unsurprisingly, the reality is unresolved. Despite Mullin's attempt to reconstruct the “real” Snowden of the past on *Ars Technica*, pages of commentary debate who Snowden was and is, without any real conclusion. The community remains conflicted, even on the question of whether knowing the “real” Snowden matters at all.

Like the discourses of Colleen's World, the discussions on *Ars Technica* about the “real” Edward Snowden appear to be important for future decisions. In Colleen's World, the decision was whether Lachowicz would be elected to office. With Snowden, the question seems to be whether citizens should trust the leaks he gave to media outlets like *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*. Interestingly, though, the question of reality did not revolve in Snowden's case around the difference between online and offline identity. There seemed to be an implicit acceptance among most responders that what he said under the handle TheTrueHOOHA was reflective of him as a person. The question of reality instead revolved around age, secrecy, and changes in human behavior over time.

On the other hand, the public/private distinction called into question the relevance of information to the “real” issue at hand: government policy and the NSA leaks. For many, the private information of Edward Snowden was irrelevant to the most important questions. Sensationalism in the media, focusing on Snowden's personality and his past, was seen as a distraction. Concern with appearance, perhaps best manifest in the techno-thriller aesthetics of the second article, subverted the political reality of intelligence and surveillance. Revealing Snowden in the techno-thriller dealt with many of the same questions of Colleen's World and Sean Smith/Vile Rat: who or what is the "real" person? Is the outward appearance of a *persona* indicative of reality? Surprisingly, these questions were answered without much discussion of the nature of digital identity. Focused on the ethics of journalism and data collection, the politics of the situation overrode the basic and vital question of what it means to interact through digital technologies. Perhaps, in the end, that is where such questions will be answered: not through philosophical discussions, but through rhetorical negotiations centered on
political gain.

Reflections

Compared to the discourses of Lachowicz and Sean Smith, the networked rhetorics of Edward Snowden/TheTrueHOoha are considerably different. In some sense, Joe Mullin’s articles implicitly assert something like a Ciceronian view of identity, assuming that Snowden’s persona as TheTrueHOoha gets at his underlying self. Readers, on the other hand, partly see this performance as different from the "real" Snowden, with many claiming that TheTrueHOoha of years ago is different from the Snowden of today. Most readers are interested in the development of Snowden’s thinking over time, a notion not excluded by Ciceronian thinking, but probably not the focus of such theorizing. Recognizing that a person changes over time excludes a central, unchanging “essence,” but still provides for some continuity. As a result, classic notions of identity conflict with postmodern notions of identity, within the same network of readers. Those readers, in becoming rhetors, constitute a network in deliberation. Within that network, there is oscillation as time goes on, with individuals responding to others in the rhetorical network, including Joe Mullin and the writers at Ars Technica. Perhaps the most important dynamic in the oscillation is the unclear political circumstances in which the deliberation happens. With two sets of stases guiding the discussion, it is unclear as to whether the network is talking about identity or about the political contestation of the NSA and mass surveillance.

Truth claims in the case of Edward Snowden on Ars Technica seem nearly non-existent. It seems natural to read this as a suggestion that truth claims are, in this case, irrelevant. For most, the “truth” of Snowden’s past has little to do with the “truth” of Snowden’s present endeavors. Knowing that individuals change over time, readers are still left to question the motives of Snowden in 2013. The utter confusion of the community highlights a strange disruption of authority on the site. The network of readers, given rhetorical power through the comments section on each article, challenges
the authority of Joe Mullin and the *Ars Technica* staff. Because the commenters are in a similar subject position to Snowden—being a forum poster on *Ars Technica*, who could later be “outed” by the site depending on circumstances—the network seeks to subvert the site’s authority by portraying the articles as unjust, “creepy,” or unworthy of *Ars Technica*’s journalism. There is extreme discomfort with the thought of identity convergence, born of political motive for those who would use it as evidence of privacy invasion. For others, there is no political motive, but instead a motive of personal preservation. Strangely, in the midst of this discussion, there is little thought given to truth claims. Though Joe Mullin has used the guise of “truth” or “objectivity,” the posters resist that authority, calling into question the very structure of truth, which may, in this case, be unknown and unknowable. In the end, Snowden’s *ethos* is deeply trapped in the problems of surveillance and the state—so much so that there may be no separating Snowden from his symbolic struggle.


5. A note on the username: "TheTrue HOOHA,” with a space, is the username dug up by journalists outside *Ars Technica*. His specific username on *Ars Technica* did not include the space; thus, I later refer to "TheTrueHOOHA."


8. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 6.

24. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 14.

29. Ibid., 1.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 6.
32. I refer here to dynamics explored in depth by Charles E Morris III, “Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover’s Sex Crime Panic.”


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid, 14.

36. Ibid, 1.

37. Ibid.


41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Much steampunk or techno-thriller literature features complex protagonist characters, often with conflicted emotion. For one example, I might point to the average-guy hero in Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash. Neal Stephenson, Snow Crash, Bantam Spectra Book (New York: Bantam Books, 2008).

45. Mullin, “In 2009, Ed Snowden Said Leakers ‘Should be Shot.’ Then he Became One.”

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. G. Thomas Goodnight, “The Firm, the Park and the University: Fear and Trembling on the

51. Upvoting/downvoting refers to a system by which users rank the best or most helpful comments in a comment thread. A large number of upvotes suggests the community sees a particular comment as helpful. A large number of downvotes suggests the opposite.


54. Ibid., 1.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.


59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.


65. Ibid, 1.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Converging Networked Rhetorics and Research Agendas

Throughout the three cases, negotiation in rhetorical networks took shape in response to the *topoi* of appearance/reality and public/private life, as well as the dynamics of praise and blame in political processes. Perhaps the most interesting finding has to do with praise and blame of various identity markers, and of *ethos* and *persona* in their respective senses. In the case of Colleen Lachowicz, the GOP followed Ciceronian lines, arguing that an underlying identity existed and was responsible for Santiago. Lachowicz and her supporters countered, arguing that separate performances did not point to a single, underlying self, but instead to different situations. In mourning Sean Smith/Vile Rat, all parties followed the Ciceronian line of thinking. For *Ars Technica* and its readers, the negotiation of Edward Snowden’s identities was not precisely clear. Joe Mullin seemed to follow the Ciceronian tradition, while readers largely argued for *ethos* being performed differently in different situations, more along the lines of Aristotelian thinking. In these cases, there is a fascinating phenomenon of oscillation, with parties moving back and forth among modes of thinking about identity. This alone suggests that contention dominates networked rhetorics of identity, especially in the case of converging offline and online identities.

Prior to the development of what McGee would describe as the fragmentation of culture, the discovery of a “secret life” or perhaps a pseudonym would almost certainly yield the Ciceronian response that an essence underlies the *persona*. As the postmodern condition has increasingly become the norm, though, contestation among these various conceptions of identity seems inevitable. If we are at a point of convergence in 2014, then it almost certainly revolves around the contrast and spectrum of thinking between these two poles. Those who would fight to see the “truth” or “reality” of a person must contest those who hold on to fragmentation and multiplicity. These networks of rhetors have conflicted throughout the cases of Lachowicz and Snowden in particular, with most of those rhetors
staking claim in a truth about identity in the *World of Warcraft* controversy.

With networks overlapping, it is not surprising that contention arises. Nor is it all that surprising that contention fails to arise when networks with similar values experience similar events. In the case of Sean Smith/Vile Rat, the absence of contestation about converging his online *persona* and his offline identity is telling. Agnew’s statement quoted in chapter two illustrates this connection: “The shift from a culture that assumes a set of shared values to one in which values must instead be negotiated may be seen as a feature of the transition from the classical to the modern era.”² While Agnew tackles the *modern*, as opposed to the *postmodern*, networked communities seem to still negotiate in an effort to share values, instead of moving forward with a decentered value system. In networks with shared values, such as the shared values between the State Department and the *EVE* community following Sean Smith's death, negotiation is not necessary. However, when networks lack shared values, negotiation must take place. What I have detailed in chapters three and five, then, is the landscape of negotiation in contemporary society, where networked rhetorics exert force and shape meaning. Of course, this all assumes that the networks interact. In the enormous topography of cyberspace, it is entirely possible for networks to not engage each other. Yet when political contention arises, networks seem likely to find out, enabling rhetorical mobilization. That mobilization is especially swift when “public” issues come into play, for example, in elections, national tragedies, and state-level scandals.

Largely, truth was claimed only in these cases when political purposes guided the discourse. Knowing that the Maine GOP was attacking her for being a gamer, Colleen Lachowicz pointed to the truth of public opinion. More along the lines of a contingent truth, her claim still sought to elevate her above the GOP because of her access to the reality of the world, where people play games, both online and offline. The GOP, of course, claimed the opposite. Likewise, in the networked rhetoric about Snowden, both the article writers and the article commenters pointed to “truth” or “reality” when
discussing political ramifications. The reality of domestic surveillance, for example, compelled many commenters to shift the _stasis_ questions to the deliberative realm, as opposed to Snowden’s identity and guilt. The same propensities probably could have been said of the Sean Smith/Vile Rat case, should there have been political contention involved. In all of these cases, the rhetors validate Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s observation that appearance/reality is used to establish hierarchies. The participants in these networked rhetorics point to truths for political advantage, working to understand motive and responding accordingly.

What was notably missing from these networked rhetorics was contentious discussion of philosophical questions. If the questions were discussed, it was under the guise of politics. The underlying nature of identity, guided by ontological questions, was not explored except through political lenses. This may be a limitation of perspective, since it is often difficult to move out of one’s own positionality, but it may indicate reluctance to engage philosophical quandaries without concrete application in the "real" world—say, of politics.

In observing that truth still seems to exist in some form for the various rhetors in these networked rhetorics, I might question whether people are generally uncomfortable with the affordances of the postmodern condition. If truth or reality is decentered, meaning-making becomes especially difficult. With Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s focus on reasoning about values, it makes sense that people would be uncomfortable giving up “truth” or “reality,” since it is a fundamental marker by which we tend to measure our experiences. Being able to establish hierarchy or authority through those markers has been a cornerstone of rhetoric since the time of the ancient Greeks. Even in subverting the authority of _Ars Technica_, the posters sought to replace it with the authority or wisdom of the crowd. Individuals still seek unity despite the disorder of postmodernity. In so doing, contention is created—hence, the negotiations of convergence seem teleological, as if moving toward a particular resolution to the problems of identity.
What emerges out of this pattern is a multi-staged development of order. First, there is a rupture, wherein meaning is overturned. This might be best characterized as the development of postmodern conditions, all of which did not arise at the same time. An obvious form of postmodern identity performance, *persona* on the Web afforded that rupture in meaning. However, over time, attempts to sift out meaning of these various performances have resulted in contentious moments. Many of these moments occur in the political sphere, as evidenced in the three cases of this thesis. Others are more social phenomena than political contestation, ranging from students getting into hot water over Facebook posts to the exposure of Reddit’s “creepy uncle” ViolentAcrez as offline, real-person Michael Brutsch. Various networks engage on various levels the convergence of identity markers. Finally, almost inevitably, a new model of understanding will develop—or an old model will resurface. The desire to develop a new model is clear in the networked rhetorics of Colleen’s World, Sean Smith/Vile Rat, and Snowden on *Ars Technica*. This turn to a new model will almost certainly ring of progress, as if part of a teleological process. Voices will almost certainly be excluded, particularly dissenting voices. And the process will restart, as new ruptures take place. These deliberations, then, seem terminable but are in fact indeterminate.

Rhetoric matters so much in these cases because modern society is witnessing what I earlier described as “identity convergence.” Tumultuous is the terrain of online identity and its meaning. People are asked to provide more details to companies online, while governments collect more data through programs like the NSA. Daniel Solove rightly describes cyberspace as “the new frontier for gathering personal information, and its power has only begun to be exploited.” Yet, the history of the Internet has favored anonymous, protected communication. As Gurak and Antonijevic point out, “It is simple in a digital environment to create multiple identities and to speak and write with a powerful sense of anonymity.” Undoubtedly, the phenomena of identity disclosure and anonymity are in processes of negotiation as of 2014. In these moments of uncertainty, rhetoric is powerful. What is
most interesting about these cases is the movement of discourse through time. Especially in the case of *Ars Technica*'s articles about Edward Snowden, it is possible to observe different rhetorical techniques and audience reactions thereto. In this way, rhetorical analysis of these cases has illuminated the development of meaning as regards digital identity. By tracing rhetorical processes, we can locate moments of convergence and divergence in meaning. Rhetoric's contribution, then, is to explain how conditions change over time through communication in public spaces.

Like what occurs offline, online behavior may demand various levels of privacy or publicity. Colleen Lachowicz's *World of Warcraft* character seems to some to be irrelevant to the 2012 election for Maine State Senate, somehow conceived as belonging to a different social and political sphere. Perhaps playing video games is seen as a form of escapism, entirely irrelevant to the decisions one would need to make in office. That escapism, then, might be a private activity, little different from reading a book. Perplexingly, though, the same subject, a video game character, is responded to differently in the case of Sean Smith. The Vile Rat identity, even if seen as a form of escapism, is deemed relevant in eulogies and throughout the mourning process. There are two possible explanations for this difference. First, the celebrations of character might expand the boundaries of what is appropriate to discuss in a public venue, largely since the discourse is epideictic in nature. Second, because Sean Smith's offline character was so similar to his online behavior, the factor of escapism was not as significant. In that instance, his private behavior being so like his public behavior might make it reasonable to discuss both in the public realm, especially because his death meant the division was no longer useful in any way. The reactions of the networks involved in the Sean Smith/Vile Rat case seem to support this second possibility, since all parties point to his diplomacy.

As all cases indicate, one's ability to control his or her online identity is an integral part of modern living. Zizi Papacharissi points out that “As identities are increasingly performed and managed online, via an architecture that combines bits and cultural references, ownership of the rights to the
privacy and publicity of these performances becomes important.” This is especially vital when juxtaposed with my earlier question about *ethos* being determined through the aggregation of data. Having ownership of any piece of information about oneself—even down to the results of a Google search—helps one maintain control of his or her image. This is perhaps best illustrated in the *Ars Technica* “outing” of Edward Snowden. Many of the comments questioned Mullin's article because Snowden had not given permission for the site to discuss his account details. One user pointed out yet another significant problem: “I'm thinking Snowden probably should have been more wary about the mega-corp he was voluntarily giving personal data to than the government.” The process of voluntarily giving data—voluntarily disclosing personal information—has become increasingly difficult to navigate. Now, every performance of identity in anything that might be construed as a “public” arena, up to and including places like the *World of Warcraft*, might be associated with one's public, offline identity. For those people in political or public positions, taking care in these performances is paramount. Ownership of identity and performance seems to be fading, allowing almost anything to become subject to public scrutiny. Yet, without the controversies and demands of politics, perhaps those performances would never be important enough to unearth in the first place.

The appearance/reality pair surfaced in each case, albeit in different ways. Appearance/reality was a clear marker of discourse in the case of Colleen's World. The Maine GOP called to readers to join them in the “real world,” reinforcing a hierarchy that diminishes the importance of video games. Simultaneously, of course, those same aggressors against Lachowicz suggested that what she did and said in the falseness of “Colleen's World” somehow mattered. If video games are in fact a form of escape, the GOP looked to have it both ways, suggesting that Lachowicz was escaping from reality and participating in it at the same time. The hierarchy in Lachowicz's case is clear, but those in the cases of Sean Smith and Edward Snowden were not as readily recognizable. For Smith, most of the players of *EVE Online* recognized that the game was not “real” and not as important as the offline world, calling
attention to the heinous death of Smith and the impact it would have on his family and closest friends.

By mentioning Vile Rat in eulogies for Smith, however, rhetors like Hillary Clinton constituted at least the behavior of Vile Rat in *EVE Online* as real and indicative of the underlying identity of Sean Smith.

In attempting to find the “real” Edward Snowden, the journalists and users of *Ars Technica* underscored the importance of time and space in the construction of reality. The “real” Edward Snowden did not merely exist at one point in time, in a fixed space, with a fixed personality. Joe Mullin recognizes temporal dynamics in Snowden's life by contrasting the past Snowden on *Ars Technica* with the present Snowden of NSA fame. He explains, “The chats make clear that what Snowden discovered while working for the government felt so deeply wrong to him that he had a major change of heart. While there was no ‘one moment,’ seeing officials lie about these omniscient spying programs over a period of years pushed him over the edge.”

Particularly in a digital environment in which almost anything can change in a matter of minutes, recognizing the role of time is imperative. Colleen Lachowicz and Sean Smith may have changed over time, just as Snowden has clearly done. What, then, would be said of the “real” Lachowicz or Smith? Already for Lachowicz, there is much to question about how her performance in a different space (the *World of Warcraft*) reflects her identity; adding the layer of time would even further complicate that question.

Through each case and by considering public/private and appearance/reality, it is clear that praise and blame are leveraged rhetorically through processes thousands of years old. Scholars and other citizens often question to what extent digital phenomena change patterns of communication and rhetoric. Indeed, understanding the changes heralded by the digital era is one of my chief concerns as a scholar. Here, though, it seems that little has changed via the introduction of digital identity, at least as regards the processes of negotiation. There is more to talk about, no doubt, but the same basic *topoi* drive the discussion. Political forces shape the discourse through exercises of power—power over what is public and private, power over what is considered real and unreal. Language of markets and
currency largely steer the discussion of the public/private pair, suggesting that Weintraub's understanding of the public as market is relevant. Appearance and reality are leveraged to create hierarchies of importance—only, in these cases, the concepts are applied to discuss the “unreal” world of the Web.

Discussing the nuances of digital identity does present some challenges to the rhetoric of praise and blame formulated by ancient thinkers. Still, though, the rhetorical dimensions of these cases show precisely what a rhetorical scholar might expect: that the reception of rhetoric depends on occasion, timeliness, and propriety. In a eulogy, the rhetor praises the subject for his or her good deeds. Cicero's explanation still applies today: “in praise and censure it will be necessary to observe not so much what the subject of the speech possessed in bodily endowment or in extraneous goods as what use he made of them.” The person’s actions are to be judged—and they certainly were in each case. Particularly in mourning Sean Smith/Vile Rat, rhetors engaged as if following directly the advice of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. The nature of digital identity did not enter into the conversation; instead, each rhetor praised Smith for his actions in every realm: in the home, at work as a diplomat, and in his capacity in EVE Online. No longer living and changing, the task of reconciling the identities became much more manageable. For Lachowicz and Snowden, the philosophical nature of digital identity was not as important as was the appropriateness of the inquiry and commentary. In theory, digital identity seems to complicate rhetorical situations; in practice, negotiations of identity continue without much consideration of metaphysical existence.

The implications of negotiation through networked rhetorics

Precisely what it means to sustain a digital identity is not clear. For individuals, the performance of digital identity is a complicated process, and is likely to become more complicated over time. Controlling the performance of identity both offline and online is vital, but how to do so is not clear.
Should one refrain from posting on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter? Or from playing games like World of Warcraft? Or, should one treat every online action as public, down to clicking a link on a website? There is not a clear line between what is public and what is private on the Web. In the wake of revelations about NSA spying, it seems increasingly likely that almost no rhetorical act is “private” or “anonymous” in the sense that it will never be tied to one's corporeal self.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that each of these cases involved a public figure: a woman running for political office, a U.S. diplomat, and a former NSA employee turned (in)famous whistleblower. An average individual may have little cause to worry about the implications of performing identity online, unless his or her actions are particularly public or controversial. Still, concern over employers, peers, or even students gathering personal information would not be unfounded. What might be done with that personal information could range from innocuous discussion to public defaming, bullying, or even blackmail.

On an institutional level, the meaning of digital identity and its negotiation is surprisingly pertinent. From the posters on Ars Technica to those commenting about the Colleen's World attacks, there appears to be significant resistance to practices that might invade the expectation of privacy online. In Ars Technica's case, many posters perceived an unwritten “social contract” with the site, wherein the site's administrators would not abuse user data. What, then, might be said of universities, businesses, or even public institutions? Universities could expend copious resources researching every detail of a candidate's history; with the aid of the Web, much information would likely surface. To what extent might a candidate's past comments in a video game or on a Web forum matter? Should institutions consider only actions associated with one's real name when assessing job candidates, employees, or other people associated with the institution? These answers will vary depending on each institution, but controversy is sure to follow should the institution's actions be seen as a threat to the established order of values, as was the case in Colleen's World and on Ars Technica.
The rhetorical implications of these cases are subtle yet important. Aside from the refrain that “rhetoric matters,” it is important to recognize how rhetoric enables and limits deliberations about identity and digital life. Much of the answer can be summed in one word: \textit{kairos}. Here I would borrow from Gurak and Antonijevic, who note, “While not normally considered one of the traditional rhetorical canons, opportune moments in digital space are in fact one of the psychological characteristics that can be used, intentionally or inadvertently, to create interest and action around a topic.”\footnote{14} In many ways, this thesis is designed to capitalize on the opportune moment of social change as regards identity, to see how rhetoric operates in a moment of significant shift. The same can be said of almost any digital phenomenon. There is scarcely time to think of long-winded philosophical responses about digital identity when Lachowicz is being attacked, Sean Smith is being eulogized, or while the Edward Snowden drama is unfolding. These messages spread through networks, perpetuated by links. In this way, \textit{kairos} is not just temporal, but also spatial, linked with the rhetorical canon of arrangement.\footnote{15} Opportune moments cascade through opportune places to create fast, in-the-moment deliberations. Captured in frozen time, archived on the Web, it is possible to understand these relationships; yet, to do so, the critic must be aware of the networked shape of rhetoric in the digital realm.

Understanding the networked shape of rhetoric online explains not just how these events unfolded, but how almost all digital discourse unfolds. Viral videos and memes travel through these rhetorical processes—what Warnick and Heineman describe as “rhetorical uptake.”\footnote{16} With the starting point of rhizomatic rhetoric, I have delved into the larger networks of rhetorical action online. Kephart and Rafferty claim, “a rhizomic understanding of rhetoric is a useful lens to view postmodern argument as it provides a means to engage the development of multiple, interconnected lines of argument and the development of rhetorical tropes in the context of a hyper-mediated political campaign.”\footnote{17} Baudrillard specifically links the development of networked engagement to significant changes in public and private life; he details, “Our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at
odds with his objects and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks.\textsuperscript{18} Observing negotiations of digital identity play out through these networks of engagement illuminates what might be considered a serious change in the way rhetoric is carried out online. Fragments are pieced together to form messages not in whole, but as part of larger structures of communication. Thus, instead of referring specifically to rhizomatic rhetoric, I have referred to networked rhetorics. These networked rhetorics take the shape of the network through which they circulate—for example, through the comments section on the Vile Rat tribute video on YouTube, or the comments section on Joe Mullin’s \textit{Ars Technica} articles. The overlap of networks allows rhetorical convergence, creating points of contention over values.\textsuperscript{19} Identity can be formed in the same way. If we are constituted through networks and negotiate through networks, as these cases suggest, then a networked approach to rhetoric will best help scholars understand the processes of digital rhetoric.

\textbf{Limitations of the present and possibilities of the future}

As I noted earlier, I have designed this thesis to capitalize on \textit{kairos}, observing an important moment in the negotiation of what digital and offline identities mean. Problematically, \textit{kairos} here both provides and severely limits opportunity for understanding. Digital life and digital phenomena are ever-changing. While I have captured a snapshot of digital communication and rhetoric, its nature will surely be immensely different in the very near future. Previous scholars who have worked on digital rhetoric projects have quickly found their material out of date, not because the research was in any way deficient, but because so much can change so quickly. My hope is to avoid these pitfalls as much as possible. By positioning this project as an exploration of traditional rhetorical \textit{topoi} in digital environments, I believe it will illuminate more than just the contours of discussion in 2012, 2013, and 2014. The rhetorical processes of identity negotiation likely will not change significantly, at least not
in how the topics of conversation are organized. Means by which people communicate are always subject to change—tomorrow, Facebook may be nothing but a memory—but human patterns of thinking and behavior are often more static than those means of communication. Still, the development of new technologies like virtual reality, Google Glass, new social networks, and unexpected new ways of interacting with others will quite certainly change the nature of digital identity, and possibly the nature of rhetoric online.

Rhetorical scholars might take from this project a focus on networked deliberation and rhetoric, working to understand rhetorical events on the Web in a networked fashion. As far as digital identity is concerned, new events like the cases in this thesis are sure to happen, at least on occasion. With the changing nature of digital identity and the convergence of identity, circumstances like these are almost inevitable. Again, kairos is of the utmost importance. The critic must be ready to archive news articles, videos, forum threads, and social media posts at a moment's notice. It would be most interesting to see how these deliberations develop in real time. For the most part, I have prepared and analyzed the artifacts of this thesis after they have “settled down,” so to speak. Observing in real time an unfolding event like Colleen’s World or Sean Smith’s death would likely yield intriguing results. Having observed in real time the Snowden discussions on *Ars Technica*, I observed changing topics and changing sentiment in just a matter of hours. While some of those changes can be observed in the saved archive of discussion, capturing the discussion in real time gives more insight into the timeliness, appropriateness, and overall feel of the situation.

Today, human identity is shaped profoundly by our relation to technology. Avatars, user names, handles, and social networking profiles represent us, but are also in some ways a part of us. As humans attempt to make meaning of what identity is, both offline and online, rhetoric will play an important part in defining and describing our relationships with technology. It is safe to say that the virtual self is here to stay. It is also safe to say that the theories of rhetoric humans have observed for thousands of
years are here to stay. While digital life has introduced new forms of communication, thinking, and behavior, the forces of rhetorical living and meaning-making constantly shape discourse, both offline and online. Rhetoric's power to shape reality persists, be it through the ancient tradition of oratory or through the display of 1s and 0s on a computer screen.
Notes


7. Again, prudence may be a helpful way to think about the rhetor praising his or her subject. See: Browne, “Edmund Burke’s Letters to the Sheriffs of Bristol and the Texture of Prudence,” 127–128.


16. Barbara Warnick and David Heineman, Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media, 2nd ed,


19. I would point, finally, to the notions of reasoning about values in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s enterprise. In the digital age, we reason about values through the intersection of rhetorical networks. As networks converge, contention becomes possible and claims to notions such as “truth” and “reality” take place. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, Ind.; London: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 2–4.
Glossary

**Ars Technica**: a website publishing articles and other content concerned with technology news. This is sometimes abbreviated by members of the *Ars Technica* community as Ars. I have not adopted that abbreviation because of its obvious connotations in rhetoric (*Ars Rhetorica*, for example). On *Ars Technica*, users are able to post comments under each article, as long as they have registered. *Ars Technica* typically posts high-quality content and in-depth reporting; its users frequently give praise for the journalists creating content for the site.

**Avatar**: in games such as *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft*, players create characters to control in the game. Avatar refers to the character. Santiaga, for example, is the avatar Colleen Lachowicz controlled in *World of Warcraft*.

**Digital**: digital refers to electronic forms of communication or interaction displayed on a screen. In this thesis, I use digital largely in context of the Internet and the Web. Digital could also encompass video games not played online, and certain interfaces on televisions (only those users can control).

**Downvoting**: paired with upvoting, this is a system by which readers vote for which comments are best on a particular website. *Ars Technica* uses a system of upvoting and downvoting to indicate to users which comments best supplement discussion. Downvoting suggests the comment is not helpful.

**EVE Online**: an online video game classified as a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG). This game is set in space and was played by Sean Smith/Vile Rat.

**Internet**: used interchangeably with Web in this thesis. This term typically refers to all services using data connections through the primary network providers across the world. Outside of Web content, this could include video games, instant messaging protocols, and databases.

**Network**: though typically used in the context of digital phenomena, principles of networks also apply to offline interaction. In referring to networks in this thesis, I am referencing the online form of networks.

**Online**: in this thesis, online refers to interactions on the Internet or Web.

**Page**: used on a few occasions in this thesis, “page” refers to comment threads on news articles or message boards. Each page only loads a few comments (usually ten) before the user needs to click “next” to visit the next set of comments. This limitation is often put into place to prevent the user from having to scroll far down a page.

**Upvoting**: paired with downvoting, this is a system by which readers vote for which comments are best on a particular website. *Ars Technica* uses a system of upvoting and downvoting to indicate to users which comments best supplement discussion. Upvoting suggests the comment is helpful.

**Web**: used interchangeably with Internet in this thesis. This term typically refers to services rendered in a Web browser (such as Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Google Chrome), those primarily being web pages using hypertext.
*World of Warcraft*: an online video game classified as a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG). This game is set in a fantasy world and was played by Colleen Lachowicz.
Selected Bibliography

I have chosen a selected bibliography for this thesis. I am focusing on academic sources (journal articles, book chapters, books, theses, and dissertations) in an effort to make the bibliography most useful for my readers. I have selected academic texts I cite in the thesis as well as a few academic texts that have influenced my thinking (but are not cited elsewhere in the thesis).


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