Writing Against Harassment: Public Writing Pedagogy and Online Hate

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Abstract: Of the 40% of internet users who have faced harassment online, young adults, women, and racial minorities are especially vulnerable, experiencing more severe harassment and experiencing it more often. This article attempts to reconcile the increasingly urgent calls for students to compose in public spaces online with the reality of potential harassment. Compositionists should avoid relying on a Habermasian understanding of the public sphere and instead embrace a political, ecological approach to public writing that recognizes publics as the result of the interactions between multiple texts and actors, and that attends to the ways in which power relations alternately shape, constrain, and enable those texts and actors. This model equips students with a more sophisticated framework for understanding internet publics, and will ultimately empower them to make informed rhetorical choices about which public networks to enter, ensuring not just more effective rhetorical action but safer online experiences.

In late January 2015, Anita Sarkeesian, founder and host of the popular web video series *Feminist Frequency*, published a blog post containing every hostile, hateful, and violent Twitter message she received in one week's time ("One Week"). A sampling of those messages demonstrates just what kind of antagonism Sarkeesian faces every day online:[1]

> @Femfreq Shut the fuck up you fucking cunt and make me a sandwich

> @Femfreq Eyo fucking slut. If you ever come to Europe I will rape you into oblivion

> @Femfreq uh boohoo stop crying you selfish faking bitch and get over it who would rape you your fucking ugly you Arab bitch

> @Femfreq I WANT TO FUCKING STAB YOUR STUPID FUCKING UGLY SHAPED FACE YOU FEMINIST CUNT, KILL YOURSELF, NO ONE WILL CARE BITCH.

Over the week Sarkeesian documented, she received more than 150 such messages— all in response to her decision to launch a Kickstarter campaign to crowd-fund a new video series investigating the most common tropes used to depict women in video games. Despite the harassment, Sarkeesian eventually exceeded her fundraising goal, receiving more than $150,000 from 6,967 backers ("Kickstarter Project"). The onslaught of sexist invective, however, continues daily, four years after launching her campaign.

In many ways, Sarkeesian has done exactly what digital compositionists have argued students should be doing in composition classes: through critical, rhetorical engagement with the affordances of new media, she created and circulated compelling arguments for public audiences. In 2015 alone, for example, *Feminist Frequency*'s YouTube channel recorded more than 4 million views, sparking discussion from game designers and players alike (Feminist Frequency 13). However, Sarkeesian's success has come with a clear price, as the tweets above indicate: despite demonstrating what many of us would judge to be impressive digital composing skills, Sarkeesian must contend with abuse meant to intimidate and silence.

Sarkeesian's experience is alarming in its own right, but such abuse is, in fact, becoming increasingly common. A 2014 Pew Internet study found that 40% of internet users have faced harassment online (Duggan). What's more, young adults, women, and racial minorities are especially vulnerable: these groups experience more severe forms of

harassment, and they experience it more often. This study—and the experiences of internet users worldwide—suggests that although we may be increasingly comfortable asking student to compose online, the internet is by no means welcoming to all students, especially those already targeted by gendered and/or raced oppression. What, then, are the ethical and pedagogical implications of asking students to compose in online spaces that may be hostile or even outright abusive, especially towards those who inhabit already-marginalized identities, and how do we prepare students to compose for these publics?

In this article, I attempt to reconcile the increasingly urgent calls for students to compose in public spaces online with the reality of potential harassment. Digital compositionists should take care to avoid relying on a Habermasian understanding of the public sphere that presumes students can speak freely, reaching a neutral and rational audience. Harassment and threats to women online demonstrate the dangers of such an assumption and work to undermine the promise that digital, public writing holds for composition pedagogy. Instead, I argue that we should embrace a political, ecological approach to public writing that recognizes publics as the result of the interactions between multiple texts and actors over time and that attends to the ways in which power relations alternately shape, constrain, and enable those texts and actors. This model not only accounts for why harassment happens online but also provides tactical solutions attuned to ever-shifting power relations. Recognizing that online publics are not comprised of disinterested actors equips students with a more sophisticated framework for understanding internet publics and will ultimately empower them to make informed rhetorical choices about which public networks to enter, ensuring not just more effective rhetorical action but safer online experiences.

Public, Digital Writing

Composition, as a field, has always been interested in public writing. Indeed, justifications for teaching writing and rhetoric often appeal to the classical rhetorical tradition of preparing students for public life and instilling a sense of civic virtue (Crowley; Halloran). Compositionists drew from this rhetorical heritage as the emergence and increasing ubiquity of digital writing technologies promised new ways of engaging students with public rhetorics. Kathleen Yancey's influential 2004 *CCC* article was one of the earliest—and strongest—calls for composition to make use of emerging writing technologies like the internet to reach public audiences, advocating "a curriculum that prepare[s] students to become members of the writing public" (306). Yancey's widely-cited argument has informed the work of compositionists who have eagerly incorporated digital writing technologies into their courses not only as a means to widen the scope of student composing practices—especially in terms of producing multimodal texts—but also to help students participate in public arguments through online composing and delivery tools. The internet does indeed make public writing more accessible to students, as it upends more traditional, print-based models of delivery and circulation. Despite (or perhaps because of) this promise, however, compositionists and students alike too often figure the internet as a Habermasian deliberative public sphere that disregards participants' status differences. Online harassment, I argue, demonstrates the inadequacies of a Habermasian approach to online publics. If we hope to enact Yancey's call then, we must account for the fact that internet writing publics are not necessarily open to all, and, more importantly, offer students strategies for resistance.

Many digital writing scholars value the internet in particular because of its ability to foster the kind of civic virtue that classical rhetorical instruction emphasized. That is, to some extent at least, compositionists understand the internet as a technology of public writing, a means to explore and enact "critical, civic participation and agency" (Anderson 45). To be sure, the internet excels at bringing together sometimes large and/or disparate groups of individuals to debate, and can function as an exceptionally powerful mechanism of delivery and circulation (Porter; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel). These features—the capacity to bring together strangers to discuss matters of common concern, and the means to circulate texts among those strangers—are generally considered two of the most common features of publics, especially as defined by rhetoricians.

Rhetoricians who theorize the public sphere typically do so by drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas, whose influential theory of the public sphere originates in late eighteenth-century bourgeois culture. Habermas understands the public sphere as a place where private citizens can come together free of the oversight of church and state and engage in reasoned, respectful debate about matters of common interest. This debate was often temporally and spatially varied, and thus was facilitated through texts (Warner). Crucially, Habermas' public sphere is characterized by its accessibility— any citizen, regardless of status, can participate in the reasoned dialectical debate that is essential to civic life. Even though the open, deliberative public sphere Habermas theorizes functions more as an idealized abstraction than a descriptive reality—a mechanism by which to imagine civil, public deliberation—the Habermasian public sphere continues to be foundational in contemporary approaches to the public sphere and public rhetoric.

Many public sphere scholars, however, have thoroughly criticized Habermas, especially for his inattention to the

material inequities that can restrict access to public venues. Nancy Fraser argues that although the Habermasian public sphere functions on the assumption that any "extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized" (115), in practice, "such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates" (120). In other words, Habermas' model of the public sphere is inadequate because it fails to account for the ways in which participation in the public sphere often hinges on gender, sexual, class, and racial identities. The result, says Iris Marion Young, is that "the norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people" (123), or, to put it in more rhetorical terms, "everyone is excluded from the discourse who does not engage in a very limited form of argumentation" (Roberts 51). Consequently, a Habermasian public sphere perpetuates—intentionally or not—a limited understanding of rhetorical practice that discounts the power relations that can shape rhetorical agency and leaves rhetoricians unprepared to address instances of exclusion such as online harassment. What's more, a Habermasian model of the public sphere suggests a singular, stable public sphere, or, as Michael Warner describes it, "a kind of social totality" that assumes a homogeneity of ideologies and identities (65). Fraser offers an alternative approach, proposing "subaltern counter publics" in place of the singular public sphere. A multiplicity of counterpublics embraces a more ecological understanding of rhetorical agency, one that better addresses the need for participatory parity and challenges the hegemonic Habermasian public sphere (Warner). Public rhetoric, then, is best imagined as a collective of overlapping, fluid, fragmented publics that value varying participants and modes of rhetorical engagement rather than a unified, stable, homogeneous public. Such an approach is especially critical online, where increasingly diverse users are able to produce arguments in new and differing ways.

These criticisms of Habermas have not eluded compositionists, however, and typically arise in the admission that public writing is "risky" in one way or another (Rivers and Weber; Weisser; Welch). Indeed, it is the risky, unstable nature of public rhetoric that signals the inadequacies of a Habermasian public sphere. Acknowledging the riskiness of public writing is another way of acknowledging that public writing is not necessarily open or accessible, and it invites us to consider what specific barriers might exist for would-be public rhetors. However, the question of risk rarely surfaces in compositionists' discussions of online publics specifically, which instead tend to focus on the ways in which the internet can foster lively publics. Matthew Barton, for example, contends that wikis, blogs, and discussion boards function as critical locations of public debate, while Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin argue that online spaces can support the kind of dialogic "back-and-forthness" that characterizes public discourse. Both articles describe internet technologies as open and accessible, but neither considers the social relationships that may prevent participation in these publics. Such Habermasian approaches to online publics are apparent in the work of compositionists who claim that one of the primary benefits of internet writing technologies such as blogs, ePortfolios, and social media is their openness: they "provide equal access to a public voice," (Smith 38), allowing students to "reach wide public audiences" (Dubisar and Palmeri 89) and "comment publicly in the sphere of intellectual exchange" (Clark 34). These arguments all rest on the premise that online writing is inherently egalitarian, and although I share these scholars' enthusiasm for the potential of internet writing publics, I am concerned that they perpetuate overly simplistic and potentially exclusionary conceptions of the public sphere.

These assumptions are even visible in explicitly pedagogical material such as the recently published textbook, *The Digital Writer*, which addresses internet-based public writing in detail. Here, the question of "public audiences" is exclusively rhetorical, with very little discussion of the obstacles that can preclude participation in these publics, such as access to technologies or online harassment. That is, this textbook —like the scholarship it builds from— overlooks the power relations that might silence or devalue students and suggests that students will be able to reach and potentially influence internet publics if only they compose the appropriate rhetorical intervention. Such Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere persist likely because they represent an idealized democracy especially appealing to those of us who recognize the role rhetoric plays in deliberative processes as well as its fundamentally forward-looking, world-making function. However, they are dangerous because they can blind us to their own exclusivity and can ultimately end up sustaining the restrictive assumptions upon which they reside. Moreover, they leave instructors and students alike unprepared to understand or respond to such exclusion if they encounter it. Online harassment, which disproportionally targets women and people of color, presents a particularly stark challenge to Habermasian approaches to internet publics because it demonstrates how power relations can exclude participants in what's often invoked as an open and accessible space. We must therefore thoroughly interrogate our assumptions about internet publics in order to recognize the potential risks those publics might pose to students.

Online Harassment

As we increasingly ask our students to enter public spaces online, we must then consider what barriers exist to full, equal participation and recognize online harassment as one such barrier. In spite of the very real challenges online harassment poses, however, compositionists have neglected to examine how online harassment might inform our

public writing pedagogies.{2} This oversight seems particularly egregious given that digital writing specialists have long explored how gender and other identity categories may limit equal participation in internet spaces (Addison & Hilligoss; Banks; Hawisher and Sullivan). If, as Jessica Megarry argues, "equality online is dependent not only on the ability to occupy a space, but to be able to influence it and speak without fear of threat or harassment" (46), then it is well worth questioning how online harassment limits access to internet publics.

Because it can take so many forms, online harassment is difficult to define, but for my purposes here, I characterize it as disparaging, degrading, or threatening internet-based discourse that attempts to silence or otherwise undermine either its intended target and/or bystanders. Online harassment is often explicitly sexist, racist, and/or homophobic, and can manifest in various modes including the visual, alphabetic, and aural. Importantly, online harassment is distinct from mere "trolling." In contrast to online harassers, who wish to exert power in order to exclude others, trolls are better described as "agents of chaos" who act "in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose" (Buckels et al. 97). Anthony McCosker suggests that "trolling" may even be productive at times, as it can disrupt norms and create dissent to ensure vibrant, open online spaces. It is therefore dangerous to use "trolling" as a blanket term to describe any and all anti-social behavior online. The online harassment I describe here is not the same as the sometimes-playful, sometimes-annoying kinds of discourse that the term "trolling" calls to mind, and conflating the two only trivializes the very real sense of violence that many targets of online harassment report (Duggan; Jane; Mantilla).{3}

Since at least the late 1990s, researchers beyond composition studies have recognized gendered harassment as a barrier to participation in online publics. In her 1999 study of harassment on academic listservs, for example, Susan Herring found multiple incidents of gendered harassment, which she argued was meant to "[limit] the scope of female participation in order to preserve male control and protect male interests" (152). Likewise, in 2005, Azy Barak claimed that "gender[ed] harassment in cyberspace is very common" (78) and serves as "a major obstacle to the free, legitimate, functional, and joyful use of the net" (77-8). As recently as 2014, Emma A. Jane warned that online harassment "is getting more prevalent, it is getting uglier, and it has a number of distinctly gendered characteristics" ("Back to the Kitchen" 534). The work of these researchers —and others (Cole; Mantilla; Megarry; Shah)— suggests that harassment has long been an impediment to participation in internet publics and continues to present a challenge to women specifically.

Even though, as this scholarship suggests, online harassment is by no means a new problem, there is a dearth of quantitative research on online harassment. A 2014 Pew study, however, does shed some light on the scope of online harassment today, finding that 40% of internet users have experienced online harassment (Duggan). Notably, young adults, women, and people of color are most vulnerable to online harassment: 70% of users aged 18-24 report experiencing harassment, while young women in the same age category were nearly twice as likely as their male peers to experience sexual harassment online and more than three times more likely to have been stalked online. While the Pew report provides very little information about how harassment varies across racial and ethnic identities, it does note that 51% of black internet users and 54% of Hispanic internet users have experienced some kind of abuse online, compared to 34% of white users.{4} Indeed, the little research that does exist on internet harassment rarely takes an intersectional approach to identity, and it almost always focuses on gender alone rather than other identity categories such as race or sexual orientation. This oversight limits our understanding of the dynamics of online abuse and most certainly deserves further study.

Although it may be difficult to quantify internet harassment, the experiences of those who have experienced it speak to its dangers, especially for women. In 2013, for example, blogger Caroline Criado-Perez launched a public campaign to feature prominent women on British bank notes. After the Bank of England announced they would include Jane Austen on the £10 note, Criado-Perez started receiving harassment on Twitter "at a rate of nearly one post a minute," including rape threats (Bennhold). During a Reddit AMA ("Ask Me Anything") conversation meant to focus on women in STEM fields, MIT computer scientists Elena Glassman, Neha Narula, and Jean Yang were asked about their bra sizes and sex lives (Glassman et al.; ilar769). Following Gamergate,{5} a sustained harassment campaign that erupted in the late summer and early fall of 2014, gaming journalist Jenn Frank left her job as a result of the violent and hateful comments she received, and game designer Mattie Brice decided to leave her industry altogether (Dewey). More recently, *Guardian* columnist Jessica Valenti wrote a column addressing the years of harassment she's experienced, writing, "I'm tired of logging into Twitter or Facebook just to dodge rape and death threats in response to my articles." These stories—and the stories of the many, many other victims of online harassment—suggest that the internet, as a public sphere, is anything but open to all.

However compelling these stories may be, it is important to note that experiences of online abuse are in no way limited solely to well-known women. Moreover, online harassment's effects often ripple far beyond the ostensible target, creating a hostile atmosphere that may silence potential participants. Pew's study on online harassment notes that 66% of internet users who have experienced harassment reported their most recent encounter occurred on

social media, while 22% said their most recent experience with harassment happened in the comments section of a website (Duggan). The open and interactive nature of these platforms means that, in many cases, other users can view abusive comments, even if those comments intentionally target one specific individual. While it is becoming increasingly common for websites to implement some kind of comment-moderation procedure,{6} social media platforms tend to manage user interactions more passively. In a report for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Dia Kayyali and Danny O'Brien note that "most online hosting providers—including platforms like Facebook and Twitter—ban harassment in their terms of service, but do not proactively police user behavior," instead relying on "community policing." For example, YouTube explicitly prohibits "hateful content" and "threats" in its Terms of Service ("Community Guidelines"), but its reliance on community policing means that harassing comments will only be removed if another user reports them. Unless and until a user reports such content, however, offensive comments remain visible to all readers, ultimately normalizing the culture of gendered abuse online.

Consider, for instance, the comments posted beneath ABC News' "What It Feel Like to Be a Gamergate Target" YouTube video, a report on sexism on the video game industry that includes interviews with Sarkeesian and others who have experienced online harassment. User responses disparage Sarkeesian as a "…stupid lying CUNT" (Freddy P), and pronounce "Anigga Sarlesbian is a bitch" (Seljudis). Some comments are even more explicitly threatening, such as "I just wanna fap [masturbate] watching her get f*ucked in the ass by big black d*ick" (Fernando Marroquin) or even "Anita must die" (Xavier Robbins). Even though these comments are ostensibly directed at Sarkeesian, the reality is that any viewer of this news piece who chooses to browse the comments can expect to encounter this deluge of sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent remarks. In this way, online harassment often has a larger chilling effect, creating a toxic environment that discourages participation from those who are already likely to be marginalized.

The hands-off approach taken by YouTube and other social networks not only creates space for potential abuse but can also undermine the seriousness of online harassment, conflating irreverent "trolling" behaviors with more serious kinds of abuse, such as threats of sexual violence or gendered slurs. Gendered harassment, at its core, seeks to prevent women from occupying and speaking in public spaces online: much like street harassment, it "systematically targets women to prevent them from fully occupying public spaces" (Mantilla 569). Abusing women online is a means of exercising power to control digital, public spaces, ultimately excluding women from the full participation that is necessary to sustain inclusive and diverse publics. It is therefore our responsibility to not only acknowledge the very real problem of online harassment, but to work with our students to help resist attempts at silencing and exclusion from the digital spaces they occupy.

Rewriting Online Publics

Online harassment demonstrates the limits of conceiving of the internet as a Habermasian public sphere and threatens to erode the pedagogical promise of digital public writing. Writing teachers who ask their students to compose for public audiences online, then, are obligated to address this problem and to offer students tools for safety and resistance. In this section, I argue that teachers and students alike would be better served by a more sophisticated theory of online publics, one that refutes the myth of the stable, singular, accessible Habermasian public. Theorizing digital publics as collaborative networks that both sustain and are sustained by power relations can help writers recognize the many actors that enable harassment and offer them strategies for resisting it. Acknowledging the ways that power intersects with specific online publics can be a particularly effective way of identifying potential risk, and we should more explicitly ask our students do this before contributing to any internet public. I supplement this theoretical orientation with more practical steps; namely, teaching students basic online safety habits aimed at directly combatting the risk of online harassment.

Political, Ecological Publics

Students and the texts they produce suffer when we rely on Habermasian models because we fail to address the exclusionary nature of particular publics, and we fail to account for the rhetorical complexities of public writing. In their study of multimodal public composing, Michael-John DePalma and Kara Poe Alexander found that students tend toward a Habermasian approach to public writing, conceptualizing a singular, wide-open public. As a result, students are not only less rhetorically effective, but are unable to challenge the exclusionary mechanisms of internet publics. For the students they studied, "The 'public'… became a substitute term for an ill-defined mass….'[P]ublic' was offered as a default term that represented anyone and everyone who might happen upon students' multimodal texts while browsing the Web" (186). Additionally, students had difficulty "understanding how their audiences would interact with and understand their multimodal texts" (187). DePalma and Alexander's study suggests that despite students' presumed digital expertise, they can have a hard time making sense of public audiences and how they

might use internet technologies to productively engage those audiences. We need a more sophisticated model of internet publics, not only to ensure students can successfully navigate online publics, but to ensure those publics are open and accessible to all.

Students may experience difficulty conceptualizing public writing and public audiences because our digital writing pedagogies all too often rely on a Habermasian model of a fixed, singular public sphere where all actors are equal, autonomous, and free to speak. Public rhetoric, however, is not the product of isolated rhetors or of individual texts; rather, as Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber argue, it is "emergent and enacted through a complex ecology of texts, writers, readers, institutions, objects, and history" (188-9). While a Habermasian approach may lead students to believe that "going public means going it alone" (Welch 477), an ecological model of publics helps students to account for the many actors—both human and nonhuman— that enable or constrain rhetorical action and thus presents public writing as a collaborative, iterative process. An ecological approach also refutes the idea of a singular public and instead acknowledges multiple, overlapping publics. This ultimately builds a more inclusive understanding of public writing that "accommodates multiple publics whose identities and desires lead them to exploit a wide range of expressive forms" (Sheridan et al. 21).

An ecological model of public rhetoric thus demands a more expansive understanding of rhetorical agency. Because the Habermasian public sphere proceeds from the assumption that all participants are equal, rhetorical agency becomes stable, originating in an individual rhetor whose success is limited to his rhetorical skill alone. An ecological approach, on the other hand, presents a more complex view of rhetorical agency as partial, shifting, and relational. Acknowledging that many actors alternately enable or constrain rhetorical action means that rhetorical agency "is not contained within a single unified human subject, but is the function of our relational position within a multifactorial matrix" (Sheridan et al. 103). Rather than the singular rhetor "going it alone," David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel describe the ecological public rhetor as a "choreographer" (107) whose rhetorical agency lies in the ability to navigate the network—a network which consists of "a web of contingencies that are largely beyond the control of the rhetor" (xvii). In other words, rhetorical agency is never stable or complete; it is instead the ever-evolving product of affinities between multiple, sometimes unknown, actors and texts. This uncertainty, I argue, is exactly what can make digital, public writing "risky," equal parts exhilarating and overwhelming.

Public writing, then, will always present some risk to students, because it is a process that is beyond the full control of any one rhetor. Our task, therefore, is to help students recognize and respond to the rhetorical ecologies that construct that risk. Asking students to analyze the texts and actors that comprise specific public ecologies, and challenging them to "create their own concatenation of texts and consider how these texts might circulate and coordinate within their ecology" (Rivers and Weber 204) can help to account for the complexity of public rhetoric, and challenges the notion of a stable, singular Habermasian public. Rather than putting their work "out there" so that "the public" can respond, an ecological approach helps students understand public writing as networked and collaborative, and offers them tools for identifying and managing the inherently risky, messy nature of public writing.

The ecological models of public writing that Rivers and Weber and Sheridan et al. present help explain the many actors that produce rhetorical agency and productively challenge the Habermasan ideal of the singular, unencumbered rhetor. Yet, these theories overlook the inherently political nature of public ecologies, which are always embedded in power structures that may limit access to particular spaces. Supplementing ecological approaches to public rhetoric with close attention to power relations enables students to not only identify the actors that may shape their rhetorical agency, but also to determine their relationship with those actors. By considering potential power inequities, students can better assess and weigh the potential risks of engaging with specific public networks. In this model, harassment is not an insurmountable given, but the emergent and ever-changing product of power relations between a number of actors. A rhetor attentive to the power relations that structure various public ecologies may choose to approach specific publics with caution, especially if she deviates from the normalized identities privileged by those publics. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett characterize some gaming publics, for example, as valuing "hyper masculine" discourse and identities and argue that "the rhetoric […] of marginalized voices" is silenced as a result (411). A student hoping to argue for more diverse representations in video games, then, might consider her identity in relation to her intended audience of gamers in any given online gaming public and adjust her argument (or audience) accordingly. In this way, accounting for power in ecological publics highlights the "ideologically interested" nature of public writing (Weisser 96) as well as enabling rhetors to more accurately discern potential risks.

By the same token, however, this approach can also help writers identify publics that may serve as productive locations for coalition building. Scholars have identified feminist blog communities, for instance, as locations of strategic, communal resistance (Jack; Shaw). By developing "affective relations to participants within the network as well as its opponents" (Shaw), these communities are able to create relatively safe spaces that, while not entirely free from harassment, benefit from shared community standards that protect participants who may be excluded

elsewhere. Such examples remind us that "public writing need not reach large segments of the population in order to be useful and constructive [and] there is no reason to suppose that public writing must be directed to a diverse audience" (Weisser 104). Engaging with specific and perhaps even relatively homogeneous digital publics is a rhetorically sound choice that may also curb possible harassment, enabling students to enter into public ecologies that are more likely to value diverse identities or rhetorical practices.

Students may thus make use of a politically attentive, ecological theory of public rhetoric to strategically connect with —or carefully bypass—specific publics to ensure not only more effective rhetorical action, but also vibrant, open publics. When we ask students to engage with online publics, then, we must design assignments that allow students to identify the ecological nature of the public(s) they intend to enter and to make informed choices about how and when to participate in these publics. In short, being attentive to public ecologies as well as the power relations that structure those ecologies can help students identify and manage the riskiness inherent in public writing.

Digital Safety

While carefully theorizing the networked, political nature of online publics may help students avoid possible harassment, no amount of care can fully prepare any digital writer for the messy, unpredictable nature of public writing. It is therefore crucial that we introduce basic digital safety measures anytime we ask students to publish and circulate their work online. Discussing and enacting digital safety not only has the immediate benefit of protecting students from potential harassment, it also helps to emphasize the inherently networked nature of public writing. When we call attention to the many agents that help construct online identity, students are more likely to consider public writing as an ecological process rather than a static, singular intervention. Digital safety, in other words, is rhetorical.

Some digital writing scholars have already addressed important aspects of online security, asking how corporate and government entities gain access to and make use of user data (Beck; McKee; Reyman). Despite this important work, there has been a notable lack of attention to the risks users may face from other users. Harassers can and do gain access to user data—often legally, by scouring the internet for sensitive personal information—in order to further victimize or silence their targets. The most severe forms of online harassment, such as sexual harassment and stalking, can be greatly amplified if students are not aware of their security, and can even result in a practice known as "doxing," wherein harassers will exploit vulnerabilities in a victim's online security to expose sensitive personal information such as home addresses, phone numbers, or private files. While doxing is not unique to online harassers (it has been used by journalists, hackers, and even amateur detectives), it is a favorite technique that harassers use to elevate feelings of fear in their targets, and can be brutally effective in terms of silencing and scaring people away from participating in online publics.

Harassers who locate a user's personal data can use it for a number of purposes. Some choose to share private data publicly, either to shame or frighten a target. In the wake of Gamergate, for example, indie game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu were both forced to leave their homes after their addresses were made public online (Dewey). A 16-year-old Canadian man not only leaked the private information (including nude photos) of numerous women he met on gaming site Twitch but also "swatted" several of his targets, falsely reporting serious crimes at their homes to lure SWAT teams to respond (Fagone). Doxing can also serve as a tool for stalking, either by acquaintances or strangers. Carla Franklin was cyberstalked by a man she had casually dated, and after she ended their relationship, he hacked her phone, leaked explicit photos of Franklin, and posted public YouTube videos that called Franklin offensive names (Pasta). Writer Amanda Hess endured years of menacing messages from an unknown online stalker, and it was only until he left threatening voicemails on her phone did the police take her concerns seriously (Hess). Incidents like these demonstrate how easily harassers can take control of a user's information to terrorize and intimidate.

Online harassment, then, can quickly escalate, undermining targets' professional reputations, personal lives, emotional security, and physical safety. The intent, however, is always the same: to exclude specific individuals and groups from participation in online publics. In addition to asking students to consider the affordances of various public ecologies, then, it is important that we remind students to explicitly consider the relative safety of potential venues, platforms, and audiences. We might therefore design more open-ended public writing assignments that offer students options for publishing and circulating their work. For example, in an upper-level undergraduate digital rhetoric course, I asked students to design an online text (or series of texts) to address a rhetorical situation they had previously identified. Although I did require students to make their work public, they were able to choose their audiences, the form of their projects, and their delivery channels.{7} By giving students control over where and how they share their work, we not only ask them to engage in the rhetorical work of identifying, locating, and connecting with appropriate public ecologies, they also assume the authority to make decisions about how to comfortably protect themselves online.

Before engaging with online publics, students should closely analyze not just the rhetorical affordances of any platforms they may wish to use but also pay particular attention to security settings and terms of service. The following questions can help students consider what kind of relationship they intend to create with specific internet publics and can alert them to potential safety concerns as they enter those publics:

- Will you publish your work under your real name, or will you choose a pseudonym? What benefits or drawbacks might either approach offer?
- What kind of interactions do you want to have with your readers? How does the interface you are composing and/or publishing in create or limit opportunities for your readers to respond to you and/or your text(s)? For example, can you turn off comments, or block specific users?
- Does the platform you're using encourage the circulation of your text? How might your text change after you've published it? What kind of future do you imagine for your text?
- What default information (such as your location or email address) does the platform(s) you are using share with others? Do you have the option to hide this information?
- Who owns the content you are sharing/creating, and what are they legally allowed to do with it?
- How will you secure your account(s)? How strong are your passwords, and how often do you change them? How do you secure your devices, like your laptop or cell phone?

Designing assignments that ask students to grapple with questions like these will prompt students to engage in more rhetorically sophisticated composing that will also likely improve their personal safety.

Even with the strongest online security, however, online writers may still face the risk of harassment, and it is therefore important for students and instructors alike to know how to respond should harassment occur. After their own well-publicized experiences with harassment, Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn each created their own websites to provide support and resources for those who may find themselves victims of online harassment (Speak Up & Stay Safe(r); Crash Override). They recommend that users who are targeted by harassers document all instances of abuse and decide whether or not to share it, either with the specific platform, law enforcement, or even other users. Sarkeesian, in particular, has favored publicly sharing specific instances of abuse and discussing the damage it has caused her. Documenting and sharing instances of abuse can work to highlight the extent of online harassment, but it also encouraged Sarkeesian's abusers to step up their attacks. This strategy is therefore not an option for everyone, especially for a digital writer with fewer resources. Sarkeesian and Quinn both emphasize that those who are being harassed need not engage with their abusers. This advice is key especially for teachers: while one of the benefits of public writing is getting students to contend with the reactions to their arguments, we must be careful to respect the experiences of our students, and to trust their reactions. If a student does report online harassment, then we are obligated to help students consider their options and direct them to appropriate channels of support, including legal, technological, and mental health services.

Online composing presents unique security risks for all students, not just those who are already marginalized, and we must equip students to navigate these risks as best as possible. If our classes ask students to engage with online publics—as composition classes increasingly do—then we must be mindful of the safety concerns that come with writing online, particularly for those students whose marginalization is further compounded by internet publics. A pedagogy that encourages students to approach online publics as ecological and political can help students recognize the various actors involved in creating and sustaining public rhetoric, and to make strategic choices about which publics to engage, and how. Such a pedagogy also calls attention to digital identities and asks students to make thoughtful, informed choices about protecting themselves in various public venues. By pursuing a public rhetoric pedagogy that is attentive to these concerns, we can help students manage the risks of public, online authorship rhetorically and safely.

Conclusion: An Internet For All

Public writing, if it is to be effective, will always present some risk. However, those risks—including online harassment— should not discourage students from participating in public writing. While women and minority populations may shoulder a disproportional burden of online harassment, their voices are essential to create vibrant, diverse internet publics. Helping students recognize and navigate possible harassment online, then, is not just a matter of protecting individual students: it is a matter of protecting public writing online. By highlighting the ecological, political nature of public rhetoric and teaching digital safety, we can provide the rhetorical tools necessary for safe, successful public writing.

While the solutions I present here may help students manage the threat of online harassment, they will not put an end to the problem. This advice, however well-intentioned, masks the real problem: the abusers themselves. So how

might we work to stop, not just cope with, online harassment? Compositionists might begin by directly confronting the problem of online harassment with our students. Our intent should not be to scare students away from publicly sharing their work, or to suggest that women and other marginalized groups are uniquely or uniformly victims of online harassment. Rather, discussing online harassment can productively highlight the complexities of internet writing publics: it not only demonstrates how publics are both ecological and political, it also erodes the persistent notion that the internet functions as an open and stable Habermasian public. Examining online harassment—as well as efforts to resist it—can alert students to its exclusionary effects and can help students feel prepared to resist online harassment if and when they encounter it.

The field of composition also has more work to do in terms of understanding online harassment. We need to extend DePalma and Alexander's research on student's digital composing processes to learn more about how students conceptualize and make decisions about audience, delivery, and circulation online. We would also benefit from more nuanced theories of circulation and circulatory networks in order to understand how texts move, transform, and construct publics. Circulatory networks will perhaps always exist, to some extent, in a complex shroud of the unknown, but that does not mean we are incapable of constructing theories to explain mechanisms of circulation in digital, public spaces. Laurie Gries, for example, has argued for iconographic tracking as a methodology for tracing the circulation and transformation of visual texts. Such work helps to unpack the messy, often-obscured processes of circulation that construct publics and should inform our public writing theories and pedagogies. Finally, the field would benefit from further study of instances of exclusion from digital publics, as well as strategies of resistance. If we hope for an inclusive internet, it is critical that we pay attention to not only the ways in which rhetors may be silenced online, but also the methods rhetors employ to successfully resist such attempts at silencing.

Although we may not be able to stop online harassment entirely, we are still obligated to consider its effects on our theories, pedagogies, and, above all, our students. Ultimately, the prevalence of online harassment is itself an argument for teaching public writing. Digital writing technologies do indeed offer new possibilities for knowledge-making, but these technologies are not inherently progressive or inclusive. It is therefore our responsibility to make sure we use these technologies as ethically—as rhetorically—as we can.

Notes

1. In this article, I have chosen to directly quote explicit content. Like Emma A. Jane, I believe that it is necessary to cite such "explicit vitriol" in order to avoid presenting online harassment "as a mild and/or mostly benign practice" ("Flaming" 73). ([Return to text.](#))

2. Some compositionists have questioned how harassment may effect the work of women teachers and researchers online (Ferganchick-Neufang; Hawisher & Sullivan), but the field has not yet explored the pedagogical ramifications of online harassment. ([Return to text.](#))

3. Women are especially likely to find online harassment to be distressing: 38% of women who have experienced online abuse reported the experience to be "extremely" or "very" upsetting—a rate more than double that of men (Duggan). ([Return to text.](#))

4. This report does not identify the experiences of black and Hispanic women specifically, but given that young women are generally more likely to experience severe kinds of harassment, it is probable that young black and Hispanic women experience disproportionately high rates of harassment online. ([Return to text.](#))

5. Gamergate began with an allegation of unethical video game reporting: a female game designer was (falsely) accused by an ex of sleeping with a gaming journalist in exchange for publicity for her new game. These charges quickly morphed into an all-out attack on prominent female game developers and critics. ([Return to text.](#))

6. Comment-moderating procedures, if they exist at all, vary widely across platforms and websites: moderators can either review comments after they are posted, or will not allow comments to be published unless they have been reviewed and approved first. These measures are becoming more prevalent, however. Popular news site *The Guardian*, for example, recently began moderating comments more strictly in response to harassment of their female writers (Gardiner et al.). ([Return to text.](#))

7. Student projects addressed a number of rhetorical situations and audiences, and took on a variety of forms: some examples include a YouTube video advocating women's weight training, a website sharing stories and promoting conversations around disability, and a Twitter campaign highlighting locally owned businesses. ([Return to text.](#))

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