Going Public in an Age of Digital Anxiety: How Students Negotiate the Topoi of Online Writing Environments

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Abstract: Though composition studies has long sought to leverage new technologies of literacy to help students go public, we remain anxious about our ability to do so, as students commonly enter our classrooms already composing for diverse public audiences in a variety of digital contexts. Yet students, too, are often anxious about these new modes of composition, which circulate in a destabilized rhetorical environment where traditional understandings of authority, argument, and audience no longer hold. This article identifies five topoi of this new rhetorical landscape—*presence*, *persistence*, *permeability*, *promiscuity,* and *power*—describing the anxieties and affordances they present for student writers, the dispositions toward writing they foster, and the challenges and opportunities they pose for composition. This framework provides a critical vocabulary for compositionists seeking to help students negotiate emerging networked publics.

Online writing makes us anxious.

As three scholars and students of the digital[1] we ought to be more sanguine. Collectively, we have embraced a succession of online writing affordances—from HTML to blogs to wikis to Twitter Analytics—and sought to share them with our students. We belong to a field that has long been invested in leveraging new technologies of literacy to help students go public, an interest that has only intensified over the last decade, as new writing platforms have led to new writing ecologies in which members of highly social "networked publics" (boyd, "Social") write as a "mass daily experience" (Brandt 3) as part of an emerging "participatory culture" (Jenkins et al.). We should thus be ideally poised to help students navigate the affordances of this new terrain. Yet we often find our pedagogy inadequate, our vocabulary limited, and our students hesitant to participate in the very deliberative spaces new writing technologies ostensibly foster.

We do not believe we are alone. Long-standing concerns in the field about the teaching of public writing—whether classrooms can serve as publics, assignments transfer to public settings, public writing spaces serve a democratic public sphere (Eberly; Ervin; Gogan; Wardle)—have only been exacerbated by the advent of new writing technologies, and scholars have expressed particular concern about the toxicity of online public discourse, corporate ownership of "public" writing spaces, and an increasingly privatized and neoliberal public sphere (Duffy; Giroux; Welch). Against these forces, students have often been treated as hapless, even willing victims (Bauerlein; Carr) by scholars expressing a grim technological determinism (Baym 27-44). Yet even generous readings of students' technoliteracy practices sometimes discount the deeply felt challenges students experience in negotiating the terrain of participatory culture, and it is our goal in this essay to call greater scholarly attention to these experiences and to further a pedagogical conversation in response.

Our students are not naïve. But, like us, they *are* conflicted. On the one hand, they are immersed in emerging writing technologies and practicing public writing; not only do they enter our classrooms already composing for diverse public audiences in a variety of digital contexts, they often employ sophisticated strategies for doing so. At the same time, they are often anxious about these new modes of composition, which circulate in a destabilized rhetorical environment where traditional understandings of authority, argument, audience, and other classroom staples no longer hold. In the "habitus of the new" (Papacharissi and Easton), technological affordances we have long celebrated as a field can easily become liabilities; while networked publics allow for experimental revision, remediation, and remixing, they also require continual impression management. Moreover, the stakes for rhetorical failure are much higher than in the traditional writing classroom: writing that does not meet its mark is not simply a

private matter between student and teacher—with an opportunity for revision—but a public affair that may forever define a writer by one inopportune moment. Surveys of teen and young adult social media users suggest an array of concerns from hostile responses (bullying, stalking, harassment, hate speech) to corporate and government surveillance to the loss of face or livelihood from private information becoming public (Allmer 122-48; Anderson and Jiang). It is no wonder then that students may be less inclined than we are to see connections between classroom and online writing spaces (Shepherd) or resist our attempts to bridge the two.

To take advantage of emerging writing technologies to help students go public, it is critical that we understand the rhetorical practices that circulate in and shape the networked publics these technologies engender. Toward that end, we identify five critical topoi of this new rhetorical landscape: *presence*, *persistence*, *permeability*, *promiscuity*, and *power*. Drawing on recent scholarship in communication, media, and technology studies; participant feedback from our current research projects; and our own classroom attempts to help students go public, we describe the anxieties and affordances these topoi present, the dispositions toward writing they foster, and the challenges and opportunities they pose for composition pedagogy. We briefly define these topoi and the pedagogical questions they raise below, then explore each in depth.

- **Presence**: Students write in an environment in which audiences are less imagined entities than actual, often-immediate, and sometimes uninvited presences. How do we help them anticipate and respond to these present audiences, which can potentially silence as well as spark discourse?

- **Persistence**: Students write in an environment in which writing appears ephemeral, inviting experimentation, but in which every word is archived, inviting anxiety that youthful online participation will come back to haunt them. How do we help students to craft a purposeful digital presence that honors past experiences while allowing for evolving presentations of self?

- **Permeability**: Students write in an environment in which texts easily move from their original context to another, blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres and their associated discourse norms. How do we help students respond to the new rhetorical situations that may arise when their writing reaches unexpected audiences?

- **Promiscuity**: Digital environments reputedly encourage composing for mixed purposes and multiple publics on various platforms, yet students do not always take advantage of these affordances, fearing rhetorical failure. How do we leverage the rhetorical dexterity of students who do shift easily among contexts, and how do we help more cautious students find their voices in unfamiliar and potentially volatile writing environments?

- **Power**: Students write in an environment in which anyone can theoretically be an authority, a feature causing them as much concern as celebration. How do we help them negotiate ethos where traditional criteria for evaluating expertise seem inadequate and where uncertainty over how to present oneself in unfamiliar rhetorical situations may forestall public engagement?

Over the past two years, the three of us have met regularly to discuss the challenges of teaching in this emerging rhetorical environment and to compare notes on our various research projects exploring how students negotiate the terrain between academic and public writing. As part of her dissertation research, Merideth conducted interviews during the spring of 2016 with twenty-four eleventh-grade students about their experiences composing with technology for social and academic purposes; the semi-structured interview protocol in this study asked participants to describe and reflect on their early and current experiences interacting on social media platforms and composing with technology for classroom assignments (Garcia). Anna, as part of her dissertation research, studied the writing practices of eight intersectional feminist college students at a large Midwestern research university, conducting four semi-structured interviews with each over the course of two years and collecting academic and social media writing samples during the 2016-17 academic year; her goal for this study was to learn how these students negotiated the relationship between their writing in academic and online domains (Knutson). David has recently been researching students' negotiation of gender dynamics online, collecting students' writing and reflections on their experiences in two women's rhetoric courses with a public writing component in 2016 and 2018 (Gold).{2} In our conversations, we have found similar patterns of response—and similar anxieties about going public—amongst our students and participants.{3} The framework we present here has emerged from these conversations, as we sought a common language to describe the pedagogical challenges we faced. Through this framework, we hope to both raise critical questions about what it means to go public in a digital age and provide guidance for writing instructors seeking to support students in doing so.

Presence

Within composition studies, we tend to posit a present audience as an unequivocal good. Indeed, in the dominant model of the rhetorical situation, a discursive act cannot *be* rhetorical unless there is an actual audience of decision makers who respond to it (Bitzer 7-8). Our conception of audience may also be influenced by the experience of writing for a scholarly discourse community, which little resembles the discursive world in which our students go public. Audience feedback, if we ever receive it, arrives slowly and typically secondhand, mediated through citations in other works rather than via immediate and direct response, and politeness norms tend to serve as a buffer to more visceral displays of disagreement.

For our students who write in online public spaces, audiences are always already present, often less a goal than an expectation or even nuisance. Several of David's students expressed frustration when the careful Wikipedia edits they made for a class project were overwritten before they could share them with the class—and in one case, *as* they were editing. Even when desired, audiences can provoke anxiety, as anyone who has anticipated reading a referee response can attest. For students, anticipating audience response when writing is a daily occurrence. *Can I post this? If I do, what will Mom think? Friends? Potential employers?* One of David's students reports agonizing for days before posting on Facebook about an experience she had overseas that caused her to reflect on her privilege, merely because it contained a stronger emotional response than she believed the platform allowed. (As our students tell us, Facebook is for sharing, but not *sharing.*) Expecting to be called out for being too "philosophical" or "political," she was relieved when her friends and family responded positively to her reflections.

We find that students tend to deal with the anxiety of present audiences in three broad ways: avoiding audiences, curating audiences, and actively ignoring audiences. Avoidance is perhaps the most common strategy. For example, when on Facebook, Merideth's participant Nelly doesn't "usually post anything controversial or anything that could be taken wrong by anyone else," imagining her grandmother were there. In similar language, Merideth's participant Idris reports that among the internal guidelines he has for himself when posting on Facebook or Snapchat is "not to post, like, anything inappropriate or just anything controversial that will stir up a lot of tension." For many of our students, the back and forth of engaged public deliberation that we seek to encourage is something they may seek to *avoid* from their own publics.

To skirt the potential messiness of online audiences, some students carefully delimit or curate them, a strategy often marked by a keen sense of what we call *platform awareness*: an implicit rhetorical understanding of what each social networking site or writing platform is "for." For most of our students, Facebook is their most broad, "general" audience, necessary for basic relationship maintenance but somewhat Foucauldian in its panoptic ability to discipline and punish. Students seeking more intimate or less-worrisome engagement will often seek out other platforms. Merideth's participant Jamila, for example, prefers Snapchat and Kik to Instagram for the affordances they offer to control her audiences: "I don't really use Instagram. Mainly because I found that a lot of people were adding me— people that I didn't know—and I'm more of a private person." While it may be tempting to see some irony in Jamila's self-conception of privacy, she can also be seen as demonstrating sensitivity to the nuances of her rhetorical environment, making the best of the "technical architectures and social dynamics that underpin networked publics" (Marwick and boyd 1052). As José van Dijck notes, "opting out of connective media is hardly an option" (174) for most users.

A third group of students takes a like-it-or-leave-it approach, choosing to ignore audiences who respond negatively. Merideth's participant Emily, for example, dealt with a "hateful" homophobic comment on Facebook by letting it go. Rather than delete her original post or respond to the comment, Emily states, "I just saved it and showed it to a few friends. I was, like, 'Okay.'" Merideth's participant Sylvia declares, "I just kind of shrug it off," when she sees an upsetting Twitter comment. She acknowledges that she could delete or even respond to it but usually thinks, "Hmm. Okay. I'm not going to do it because I'm not in that position to do it, and I feel like it's not going to be worth it."

We find much to admire in these students' deft use of the technological affordances of online writing tools and their refusal to be silenced by unfriendly audiences. But we also find an undercurrent of rhetorical disengagement running through these three categories of response. Can we as a field use *our* rhetorical awareness to help students engage more proactively with the present audiences they find online?

To help students negotiate the topos of presence, we may need to more explicitly acknowledge both the affective nature of many online writing spaces and students' sensitivity to audience within them. Even as we seek to promote more rational public discourse, the publics for which our students typically write are not so much deliberative spaces as epideictic ones. What may seem to us like mere impression management or audience pandering may in fact serve a constitutive rhetorical function, "affirm[ing] the values that a community holds...[and] that hold a community together" (Foley 209), as well as affirming one's position in that community relative to its values. Attending to the epideictic nature of this environment means first, taking students' epideictic performances more seriously, and second, acknowledging that the "rules" of deliberative discourse we commonly teach may not apply to all rhetorical

situations. This might require that we do more to meet students on their own terms in their own spaces, helping them to negotiate the rhetorical challenges of their already-present publics.

Despite having to negotiate the pitfalls of online publics, our students are eager to engage with them. If they do not always know how to generatively do so, it may be because the technological affordances or rhetorical culture of a particular platform or the presence of a particular audience might seem to preclude effective response. Moreover, where we as scholars seek deliberation, students may prefer to avoid "drama," reduce tension, or protect their online personae. Before asking students to go public, we might take advantage of the comparatively low-stakes affordances of the classroom to invite publics *in*, providing students with a low-risk sandbox to practice response strategies to the rhetorical situations they daily encounter, explicitly exploring with them questions such as: How *does* one engage with those who offer hateful responses or violate platform discourse norms? How does one satisfy an audience of both friends and family members? How does one deal with the presence of an unanticipated audience, one not imagined but invoked just the same? These are rhetorical situations students must deal with every day; we must recognize these as legitimate, even as we seek to promote rhetorical deliberation on topics of more traditional public concern.

Persistence

Online discourse is often cast as ephemeral, yet almost everything ever written online is archived somewhere. To describe this phenomenon, we borrow the term *persistence* from new media scholar danah boyd, who defines it as "the durability of online expressions and content" (*It's Complicated* 11), necessitating new strategies for negotiating social interactions in online spaces. On the one hand, students are all too aware of the countless real-life horror stories of people's lives being disrupted because of an inadvertent, off-hand, or misconstrued post that has come back to haunt them (Mayer-Schönberger; Reische; Ronson). On the other hand, students often wish to take advantage of the archival possibilities of these writing tools, but find the sheer volume of data online means that keeping track of this information is an almost impossible task. Persistence, as we define it, thus has a second component: not only does information about us persist that we might prefer to disappear, but memories and experiences we would like to preserve and keep present may be buried in an avalanche of new data.

Students recognize the challenges persistence poses for going public in online spaces. To avoid fallout from the wrong audience digging up and reading the wrong post, they have developed both strategies and discourse norms to regulate public access to the archives of their online lives. At the same time, they report to us that they value having the ability to document their lives and revisit important moments, provided they can do so on their own terms.

We find that students tend to address the anxieties of persistence head-on. First, they use the technological affordances of different platforms to exploit both their archival and ephemeral aspects. Snapchat, for example, in its initial iteration, seemed designed to prevent potentially embarrassing archiving, with images "vanishing" after viewing. As Merideth's participant Jalil puts it, "It's more of a temporary thing—this is what happened in my day rather than this is what happened in my life," as opposed to the more archival Instagram, "where you're taking pictures and showing this progression of your life...and the special moments that you want to share with your friends." New discourse norms have emerged along with these platform choices. On Facebook, students have a shared expectation that the further back in time a post, the less "public" it is meant to be. On Snapchat, readers are expected to maintain the fiction of ephemerality the site promotes; even though "stories" can be saved, they shouldn't be. As Jamila observes, "If I send a ugly picture to somebody...they're only going to be able to see it for five seconds and then it's just gone. And if they screenshot it, I know you screenshotted it." Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd refer to this phenomenon as "networked privacy," maintained "through shared social norms over information-sharing" (1063) that users develop in online contexts.

In addition to exploiting platform affordances, students engage in active revision of their online writing, participating in what Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton describe as a key "habitus" of the new media landscape, "redaction," or the continual "editing and remixing of the self" (180). Although scholars have suggested the futility of "tracking down and deleting content once it is contributed to networked publics" (boyd, "Social" 47), redaction nonetheless constitutes a foundational literacy practice online, heightening participants' "self-awareness and self-monitoring" (Papacharissi and Easton 180). As Nelly puts it, "I know that even now in this day and age, now that I'm going to college, colleges will find me. Then if they see something that I've done, that could be the no or go for the future."

Students do seem to recognize the futility, or at least the fiction, of redaction, even as they pursue it, leading to a third persistence strategy: acceptance. Even as students attempt to monitor access to and revise their presentation of self online, there is wide recognition that earlier iterations will persist that they cannot control. This results in a somewhat curious phenomenon: rather than deleting old accounts, personae, or platforms that they have outgrown,

some students will simply neglect them.

One reason students may be reluctant to completely purge old posts or profiles, despite the potential embarrassment they may cause, is that they value the archival potential of persistence. Consider three of Anna's participants. Alice sees her Instagram account as "a little photo album" of things that she keeps for herself that she enjoys, "like a lot of travel photos." Similarly, Quinn manipulates the privacy settings of Facebook so that she can treat her account as a kind of private journal: "I've posted things on Facebook and set the privacy setting to just me...so I could see it on my Timehop in the next years." Olivia treats her Tumblr account as a commonplace book, tagging posts that inspire her on topics such as "gender and sexuality, and race.... Sometimes I am having a conversation with someone, and [I'm] like, 'Oh, this really helped me understand. Here's this.' I go back, and go through my stuff, and see if I can find it for them."

To assist students in dealing with the persistence of public writing online, we should first be aware of the persistence norms of the spaces that we are asking them to go public in—and be mindful of these when designing assignments. Wikipedia, for example, archives every edit made to a page, with its architecture allowing and its culture promoting the reviewing of this history. Any assignment involving Wikipedia, then, should include discussion of how persistence plays out on this platform and should allow students the option of editing anonymously. Likewise, any assignment including public online portfolios might include a mechanism for public access to expire or be later withdrawn. Indeed, perhaps any public writing we ask students to do should take into account how an audience might respond to such writing five to ten years hence.

Second, we should develop—and help students acquire—rhetorical strategies for dealing with persistence, explicitly addressing questions such as: How does one develop an online record of one's life that honors the past while keeping an eye toward the future? What does one do when someone digs up old information that is no longer representative of one's current ethos? Which components of a Facebook or LinkedIn profile should be public? What data should be available to or hidden from search engines? One way that boyd, for example, deals with persistence is by continually writing: "The best thing about being an active blogger is that stuff gets buried by repetitive blogging. My new stuff goes to the top of the search engines, my old stuff fades away" ("Controlling"). While this advice might appear somewhat flip, it bespeaks an awareness of both the architecture and culture of emerging public writing environments worth developing.

Assisting students in this endeavor will require becoming more tech savvy across a wider variety of writing platforms than many of us currently use and keeping up to date as new platforms emerge, features of existing platforms converge, search and newsfeed algorithms evolve, and privacy settings become more complex.{4} Our students can be a great resource for understanding the discourse norms of various social media platforms, but we find that they are less likely to take advantage of technological affordances to manage the persistence of information than they are cultural ones. The more we learn of the former, the better we can help them to balance the equation.

Permeability

In introducing students to public writing, we commonly ask them to intervene in a rhetorical situation in which the parameters that might guide their rhetorical choices are known—or at least discoverable through invention. A typical assignment might ask students to write to a specific audience in a specific genre in response to a specific exigence, making use of the available means of persuasion within a delimited set of rhetorical constraints. In digital environments, however, rhetorical situations are not so readily compartmentalized. Writing in these environments is typically marked by its permeability, the ease with which texts move from their original context to another. As various new media scholars have argued, the inherent "leakiness" of digital environments "undermines the separation of the personal and the networked" (Chun and Friedland 3), frequently leading to instances of "context collapse," situations where "people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (boyd, *It's Complicated* 31). For composition pedagogy, permeability raises the likelihood that a message crafted for one audience in response to one rhetorical situation will be consumed by another audience outside the original context, generating an entirely new and unanticipated rhetorical situation that invites—or demands—further response.

Composition has tended to treat the permeable nature of online writing as an affordance, seeking to leverage, for example, the power of remix and remediation to engage with new audiences. Yet our students are hyper-aware of the *negative* consequences that can ensue when control of a text passes from author to audience, particularly an unintended one: a private text message that ends up on Facebook, a Facebook chat reposted on Twitter, a photo sent to an intimate that makes its way to strangers. Our research suggests that students commonly respond to the anxieties of permeability by deploying what we term *containment strategies.* These strategies, which include self-

monitoring, platform selection, access management, and anonymization, take varying advantage of the technological and cultural affordances of individual platforms.

A common way for students to negotiate permeability is by careful self-monitoring of their public presentation of self across platforms. For Anna's participant Ava, who finds it "terrifying" that she has to present herself online to preschool classmates who have found her on Facebook —"people who haven't seen me in, like, 16 years"—this means carefully editing her profile: "You just have to be making sure that all of that adds up to...the most accurate, or the most flattering, representation of yourself that you can have online." Alice echoes this approach, finding that the "very real performance aspect...makes me more careful, I guess, in some instances of phrasing everything I want to say correctly and the way that I think will best reflect what I'm trying to get across."

In addition to self-monitoring across platforms, students will also choose particular platforms for different kinds of posts. In doing so, they rely more on cultural norms than technological affordances to ensure that their various presentations of self do not cross boundaries or "leak." Merideth's participant Kylie, for example, suggests that "what happens on Instagram stays on Instagram," perceiving any face-to-face compliment on her posted fanart as a violation of the discourse norms that govern the platform. Anna's participant Kate insists upon a distinction between her self-presentation on various platforms: "People will see that I'm not over my ex-boyfriend on Twitter, and they won't see that on Facebook, and they won't see that on Instagram." Nora, another of Anna's participants, confirms this cross-platform identity shifting, observing, "I get a lot more angry on Twitter than I do on Facebook. Like, I'll go on rants.... On Facebook, I feel a lot more pressure to be eloquent, to be calm, I guess."

When students do take advantage of technological affordances to manage permeability, they commonly do so by managing access to their accounts, particularly by family members. This practice seems predicated on an expectation—or hope—that these presumably less-tech-savvy audiences will not be able to follow them across the digital divide. Quinn, for example, describes assigning family members "acquaintance" status on her page, allowing her to create posts visible only to her peer group, which she designates as "friends." Anna's participant Emmanuelle takes a more global approach, limiting her Facebook account to her peers: "A lot of people add their whole families on Facebook; I don't understand why. I keep my lives very separate."

Even as they practice these containment strategies, students are aware that their presentations of self can leak, and some in response manage permeability by creating anonymous or pseudonymous accounts. Emmanuelle explains that having a Tumblr account that no one knows about "gives you the freedom to do what you want and say what you want," adding, "If I saw someone that I knew in real life on Tumblr, I'd be, like, scooting away, because I just don't want those two paths to cross." While a number of Ava's friends have pseudonymous Instagram accounts ("fake" Instagrams or "finstas"), she does not, her distance perhaps giving her some critical perspective on the practice: although finstas ostensibly allow for an authentic presentation of self—"It's supposed to be like an honest form of social media"—they can also promote "self-hate" and "cyber-bullying." Quinn, also without a finsta, has been inspired by her peers' accounts to "think more about what I'm posting on my Instagram and kind of how it's all tied to me and all my different profiles." These students' experiences suggest the limits of even successful containment strategies in managing one's presentation of self online.

How, then, do we help students negotiate the complex permeable environments in which they write daily? First, we must recognize that permeability is a feature of online public writing that must be negotiated—and one for which our pedagogy has not fully accounted. Not only must we assist students to strategize the ways that one's writing might be remixed or taken up by imagined or targeted audiences (Ridolfo and DeVoss), we must also devise strategies for assisting students in responding to unimagined or untargeted audiences. Examining 1,200 posts by 119 adult social media users, Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai found that in about half of cases, writers had only an abstract audience in mind (5); when writers did imagine targeted audiences, these tended to be "homogenous[,] consisting of only one imagined audience type," most commonly readers with whom they had pre-existing personal ties. Litt and Hargittai suggest that new media scholars should "tur[n] to professions...which have long relied on the imagined audience" for "audience training" strategies (9), a task for which composition would seem well suited. By encouraging students to systematically consider how their writing might simultaneously be taken up by those with whom they have not only "personal" ties, but "communal," "professional," and "phantasmal" ones (5), we might better help them to engage with the readers they will encounter in the permeable online public sphere.

Attending to permeability might also require acknowledging that there are some audiences that cannot be persuaded —or that do not merit engagement. We have robust theories of rhetorical response but have only begun to consider the potential of rhetorical non-response. Our pedagogy privileges response because we believe in the power of rhetorical intervention, in particular the power of writing to effect change. But silence can be an agentive choice as well (Glenn). If we can train students to become more resilient to hostile audiences, to both respond to unexpected acts of silencing and to discern the kairotic moment for non-response, we might better be able to prepare them for the inevitable moment when "permeability happens."

Promiscuity

Since the internet's development, utopian visions celebrating its potential to promote individual expression, community, and participatory democracy have been widely circulated. The advent of Web 2.0, which further facilitated user-generated content production and networked communication on a mass scale, has likewise been celebrated for its potential to democratize communication, allowing "the people formerly known as the audience" to connect "citizen-to-citizen" (Rosen 13-14), contributing as "produsers" of a "shared online knowledge space" (Bruns 23). Scholars in composition, rhetoric, communication, and other fields have often been skeptical of these claims, questioning the extent to which emerging writing technologies allow equal access to the public sphere, foster deliberative discourse, or counter neoliberal market forces (Faigley; Papacharissi; Ritzer; Selfe). While we agree that this utopian vision has often been oversold, the "participatory architecture" of online writing environments designed around "user contribution" (O'Reilly 474) *has* given ordinary citizens unprecedented access to a variety of previously hard-to-reach publics.

These publics and the platforms by which they might be reached are diverse, or, to draw on an old rhetorical term, promiscuous.{5} Ostensibly, both the architecture and habitus of networked writing environments should encourage habits of rhetorical promiscuity, allowing participants to easily write on multiple platforms for multiple purposes to multiple audiences, thus contributing to a rich range of public conversations. One might maintain a professional profile on LinkedIn, connect with friends and family via Facebook, share creative writing on a fanfiction site, engage in activism via Twitter or an online political forum, contribute to knowledge production via Wikipedia, or share one's thoughts via a personal blog or online publishing venue. Collectively, our students have done all of this and more.

Yet individually, they tend to constrict their activity to a few familiar writing platforms or channels. Nationwide, of online 18-29-year-olds, 88% use Facebook and 59% Instagram, but only 36% use Twitter and 34% LinkedIn (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 4-7). Of our own students, only a few report having their own blogs or YouTube channels or participating in online discussion forums. While most use Wikipedia, it is the rare student who has contributed to it, and few admit to writing user reviews on commercial websites or commenting on articles on professional news sites.

Why do students not take more advantage of the affordances of promiscuity, whether for the purposes of individual expression, citizen-to-citizen communication, or democratic deliberation? Many, we find, limit their number of writing platforms as a matter of practicality. Anna's participant Sonny, for example, found giving up Twitter allowed him to better deal with the "overflow of information" he felt he encountered there: "I think having one less social media outlet just gives me more time to be present." Other students abandon particular platforms as part of a maturation process. Merideth's participant Michael deleted a number of his social media accounts, in part to save space on his phone, but also because he increasingly found them to be a "distraction.... When I started to mature...then I was, like, okay, some of this stuff I don't need anymore."

The architecture of social media platforms may also play a role; while digital ecologies promote promiscuity, individual platforms prefer participants to write in the same spaces that they read; the advent of social media news feeds has exacerbated this trend, encouraging participants to read and respond to what comes to them via their feeds (Gottfried and Shearer) rather than "surfing the net" as earlier internet users might have done. This does not necessarily mean that students are reading narrowly; indeed, a number have reported broadening their perspectives via their feeds. Merideth's participant Sarah likes Snapchat for its "Discovery Page" newsfilter, which allows her access to everything from Buzzfeed articles to cooking shows. Others subscribe to news digests such as the Skimm, which enable them to keep up with current affairs. But when it comes to writing, students tend to stick to familiar platforms.

Students, of course, are not monolithic in their online writing practices. Introducing the framework for a collaborative ethnographic study on new media practice among youth, Heather A. Horst, Becky Herr-Stephenson, and Laura Robinson describe three levels of technological engagement: "hanging out," using new media to "engage in ongoing, lightweight social contact" (38); "messing around," entailing "more intense engagement with new media" (54); and "geeking out," entailing "an intense commitment or engagement with media or technology, often one particular media property, genre, or a type of technology" (65). Our student participants who write the most promiscuously tend to fall into the latter camp. Kylie documents her *Stephen Universe* fanart experiments on Instagram, making use of its algorithms to find other fanartists and share her own work. Nelly keeps a nature-focused Instagram that replicates the features of encyclopedia entries; she also has an app on her phone that allows her to contribute to the Citizen Science project supported by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. What distinguishes these students is not simply their technological proficiency but their willingness to learn as they go public, risking rhetorical failure as they teach

themselves to write in new genres and on new platforms through observation, experimentation, and practice.

We cannot emphasize enough how risky an enterprise this is. As we have seen, students will expend great effort negotiating the anxieties of presence, persistence, and permeability by limiting their platform choices, their writing activities, and audience access to their writing. A student who blogs, publicly posts on YouTube, writes fanfiction, contributes to online forums, writes for web-based publications, or even has a pseudonymous Twitter feed is taking a much greater risk of audience exposure than a student who limits their writing to Facebook, Snapchat, or other platforms where it is easier to limit one's audience. Nora, for example, found herself trolled by students she had never met after opining on a campus non-discrimination policy that became a subject of controversy on Twitter.

If we wish students to write more promiscuously, to risk new genres, platforms, and audiences, we must first recognize that some students, even those who write prolifically in their current spaces, may feel that they have little to offer a wider public. Jamila, for example, is on Facebook but not on Twitter, maintaining that there's "nothing eventful" in her life: "I'm too lame to have a Twitter.... I'm always at school or I'm always studying." Can we convince her that Twitter has other, more publicly oriented uses or that a carefully crafted tweet might even *be* the event, an "utterance [that] strongly invites exigence" (Vatz 159)? Can we convince students such as Emmanuelle that one need not have "a million followers" on Twitter to have an impact?

In deciding where to write, students often demonstrate considerable platform awareness, choosing the venue best fitted for a narrow rhetorical purpose. Yet they may also see these platforms as static, their "rules" unassailable. Leveraging their awareness by explicitly examining the histories, architectures, and ecologies of various online writing platforms might better help them to recognize "the ongoing negotiation process between platform owners and users" (Dijck 34). Though this negotiation may often seem one-sided, by "mak[ing] explicit the ideological structures that undergird" various platforms (175), we might assist students to make use of the rhetorical constraints and affordances, both technological and cultural, that each platform engenders, so as to promote whatever agency is possible within them. This might be one small way to challenge both the ideological and material manifestations of privatization (Welch 137) that limit the scope of public-sphere participation in digital writing spaces.

We might also encourage more promiscuous writing by encouraging students to see the wider public value in their seemingly private musings. Clay Shirky has suggested that sharing—the exchange of information—in digital spaces takes place along a continuum, best described by "the degree of value created for participants versus nonparticipants." At one end is personal sharing, done among "uncoordinated individuals" (e.g., meme sharing), then communal sharing, done among "a group of collaborators" (e.g., an online support group); at the other end is public sharing, done by collaborators seeking "to create a public resource" (e.g., an open-source software project), then civic sharing, done by collaborators "actively trying to transform society" (e.g., a social justice campaign) (173). We find Shirky's framework to be a valuable counter to both the dichotomy we sometimes construct in our field between "personal" and "public" writing and the dominant commercial ideology of most social media platforms, which while encouraging public writing, tends to discourage riskier forms of it.{6} To encourage rhetorical promiscuity, we might explicitly ask students to interrogate the "sharing" level at which their public writing engages and to imagine ways they might encompass these latter types, in which value accrues not just to their most intimate networks but larger ones they might not yet imagine sharing with; for example, a remediation exercise that moves from the personal to the civic, beginning with a Facebook post and ending with a crowdsourcing funding campaign or We the People White House petition. As Elizabeth Ervin has suggested, an "interested publicism" that makes use of students' personal commitments may offer "rhetorical access routes into the public sphere" (419). If the personal is truly political, the private potentially public, then encouraging a promiscuous facility with platforms and their purposes might indeed be a way to "honor the ways that personal, private interests can construct and reconstruct the public sphere" (419).

Power

In addition to deciding where and when to write in online public environments, students must also decide *if* to write, a decision often dependent on the student's perception of their ethos—their self-perceived rhetorical power—in a particular context and at a particular moment. As one of David's students recently said after being asked to edit a Wikipedia page for a class assignment, "Who am I to challenge the experts?" Our pedagogy tends to overlook this step in the inventional process; students may choose what to write about, but they typically cannot opt out of a rhetorical intervention. Moreover, individual writing assignments tend to figure ethos as applying to a discrete rhetorical act; for students writing online, however, ethos formation is an ever-ongoing work in progress, and interventions are seen not as discrete, but interlinked.

This negotiation of ethos thus creates particular anxieties for student writers. As a field, we often presume that

students are engaging in myriad self-sponsored writing endeavors, but our research here suggests they may not be doing so to the extent we imagine. Feeling a lack of power as rhetors, they may choose to *not* write, to limit what they write by self-censoring, or to write in ways we might consider arhetorical, without the apparent regard for audience we emphasize in our pedagogy. Or they might simply stick to audiences that are safe and familiar; as Nancy Welch has suggested, even rhetorically active students may "still worr[y] over how and whether to extend their voices beyond intimate groups" (132). This anxiety manifests itself in both classroom and public writing spaces, with each environment informing the other.

Kate, for example, is confident in online spaces, particularly when writing about art or feminism on various blogs and social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram; perhaps surprisingly, she is *less* confident writing in academic spaces as a first-year college student, aware that she does not have "expert" status in her major. Olivia, meanwhile, limits her discourse online, using a mostly anonymous Tumblr account where she seldom posts original content or engages in debate, in part because she seems to have internalized academic rules of discourse: "Is this actually right?" she asks herself. "Do I have proof backing this up? Do I remember this correctly?" While this is exactly the sort of "ethical language practic[e]" (Duffy 230) we would like to see transfer from academic to extracurricular settings, such transfer cannot happen if students are hesitant to engage in public discourse.

Other students respond to the online power dynamic by professing not to care about audience reaction. Michael is annoyed, but ultimately not dissuaded, by those who "faithfully want to disrespect" him: "If you don't like it, stop listening, delete my Snapchat. Do what you got to do. It's not going to stop me from doing what I love." Kylie likewise takes an all-or-nothing approach to her Instagram audience: "If you're following me...you're following me for everything I post whether you like it or not; I mean, like, it's my Instagram." This resistance to audience accommodation might appear typical of the ethos construction often ascribed to less-experienced writers. But it may also be a conscious rhetorical decision, borne out of an online rhetorical environment in which personal expression is often more important than persuasion and authenticity is highly valued. A student who seemingly "ignores" their audience may actually be feeling ownership of and power within their writing space. Moreover, in an environment in which ethos-building is a visible, ongoing, and networked process, revising one's writing to cater to audience expectations can invite undesirable response; indeed, our students report that one might even be called out as insincere by one's audience for editing a rhetorically problematic post for the purpose of ethos repair.

How, then, can we use our knowledge as compositionists and rhetoricians to assist students with the anxieties of power in digital environments? First, while we have long celebrated public writing as an unequivocal good, we must recognize that for our students, public writing may carry potentially more risk than reward—for their academic opportunities, job prospects, personal relationships, and already-existing public personae. Even if a public writing assignment seems low-risk to us, our students might not see it as a stand-alone intervention but as part of a networked series of rhetorical acts, curricular and extracurricular, contributing to their ongoing public ethos formation. If we ask our students to go public, we must also consider how our assignments intersect with the public writing they are already doing—or not yet doing—and be sensitive to the risks we may be asking them to take.

We might also relieve some of our own anxiety about going public if we were to worry less about the "authenticity" of our classroom assignments. While we of course wish to offer our students authentic genre models that will be useful to them in contexts outside the classroom, our fear of "mutt genres" (Wardle) may be discouraging us from taking advantage of an often-overlooked affordance of the classroom in teaching public writing—that it is *not* a public space. Some years ago, Rosa Eberly suggested that even if classrooms cannot be "truly public" (292), they can fruitfully serve as "protopublic" spaces in which discourse might be studied and from which discourse that later engages with external publics might emerge. Recently, Brian Gogan has suggested that we shift our focus from thinking of authenticity as a product—a function of a given piece of writing's "location" in relation to a "real rhetorical situation"— to thinking of it as more of a process, one that "embraces the practices by which writers and readers legitimate reality" (546). Following these scholars, we suggest that by embracing the provisional and protopublic nature of the classroom we might better be able to address the anxieties of power that public writing entails. Before assigning public writing, we might ask students to share their own challenges with public writing, particularly moments when they felt that they did not have the power to respond to a rhetorical situation or where their interventions failed. As Nancy Welch notes, there is great pedagogical value in considering how "our attempts to make voices heard are *foiled*" (92, emphasis original). We envision a writing sandbox (Gee 12-13), a "safe house" not just in but *away* from the contact zone (Canagarajah) of daily public writing; in this space, students might be able to reflect on their past ethos construction, both successful and unsuccessful, in various venues, and entertain future strategies. If we can allow for a space where students can experiment with public writing before asking them to go public, they might better be able to imagine responses not just to their existing audiences but to those with which they are as yet reluctant to engage.

Going Public

In presenting these five topoi of online public writing environments, we recognize that we are not the first to attempt to map the affordances and challenges of emerging writing spaces or to consider the ways that technologies of literacy shape and are shaped by users' writing practices. boyd has suggested four affordances of networked technologies—*persistence*, *replicability*, *scalability*, and *searchability*—that "play a significant role in configuring networked publics" ("Social" 46); Papacharissi and Easton describe three emerging reading and writing practices—*(authorship and) disclosure*, *listening*, and *redaction*—resulting from interactions among "networked environments, actors, and convergent new technologies" (172); and Collin Gifford Brooke proposes an alliterative revision of the rhetorical canons—*proairesis*, *pattern*, *perspective*, *persistence*, and *performance*—in light of new media.{7} While we also seek to better understand digital media and its effects on communication practices, our work diverges from these projects by focusing specifically on the pedagogical implications of the challenges that student writers bring from their online composing experiences into our writing classrooms. Specifically, we draw extensively on student voices to expose the anxieties that new media surfaces among its young users, revealing the pressure points of social media composition that otherwise might not be fully transparent or visible to instructors or researchers.

We further recognize the limits of *any* taxonomy to fully map the territory it attempts to describe; offering this critical vocabulary, our goal is to extend a conversation about how composition can continue to build on its own rich resources—particularly its grounding in rhetorical theory and longstanding commitment to technological literacy—in order to assist students to go public in these shifting rhetorical contexts. We also hope that these topoi can serve a heuristic function in the classroom, helping to surface the sometimes-hidden challenges students experience in their public writing, both self-sponsored and assigned. Finally, we hope this essay will encourage further empirical research that both examines students' writing anxieties and tests interventions to address them. Our field has rightly sought to encourage students to engage with public writing issues that worry us but seem less visible to them—fair use and copyright, privatization of the public sphere (Rife; Welch)—can we also discover what students worry about that remains invisible to us?

As compositionists, we routinely celebrate the ability of students to learn to write and the power of writing to effect change. Indeed, our commitment to the potential rewards of saying the right thing at the right time to the right audience means that we have too rarely considered the rhetorical consequences of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong audience. Our students, however, are well aware of the flip side of the equation. From an early age, they have been warned about the perils of going public online, with threats ranging from internet stalkers to college admissions officers to potential employers. Far from being immune to these warnings, they have internalized them, and they have no shortage of embarrassing stories to share about public writing gone bad. At the same time, they continue to write—on blogs, discussion forums, messaging apps, and social networking platforms—and they generously and gamely continue to write for us. Can we leverage their goodwill and their optimism about writing to help them make effective rhetorical choices in their own self-sponsored writing as well as the writing we assign them? Can we make effective use of the technological and cultural affordances of digital writing environments and classroom spaces alike to help our students go public?

At the start of the digital writing era, Lester Faigley suggested that with each new technology of literacy comes "another major renegotiation of pedagogy and authority" (35). As social media platforms emerged, Kathleen Blake Yancey called witness to the emergence of writing publics whose members compose "largely without instruction and...largely without *our* instruction.... [T]hey have a rhetorical situation, a purpose, a potentially worldwide audience, a choice of technology and medium—and they write" (301-02, emphasis original). The renegotiation this change has engendered now appears less a kairotic "moment" than an ongoing feature of our pedagogical lives, as we seek to understand and attend to not just the latest literacy technology but "whatever genre will emerge in the next ten minutes" (298). Yet even as students write without instruction, they still seek instruction; even as they go public, they recognize the risks in doing so. And despite their apparent technological proficiency, they are not immune to the anxieties our digital era engenders. In assisting students to negotiate these anxieties, we may also relieve some of our own.

Notes

1. David Gold is Associate Professor of English, Education, and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan;

Merideth Garcia is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; and Anna Knutson is Director of Composition and Assistant Professor of English at East Tennessee State University. ([Return to text.](#))

2. The University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (registration number: IRB00000246) has reviewed these studies, approving the first two and classifying the third as exempt from ongoing review. ([Return to text.](#))

3. Pseudonyms have been used and occasional filler words (*um, uh*) removed from transcribed quotes. ([Return to text.](#))

4. Resources we have found useful include the Social Media Collective Research Blog (socialmediacollective.org), the Data & Society Research Institute (datasociety.net), Taylor & Francis's Social Media Research gateway (explore.tandfonline.com/page/est/social-media), and the Pew Research Center's ongoing surveys of social media use (pewresearch.org/topics/social-media). ([Return to text.](#))

5. Within rhetoric, a "promiscuous" audience is traditionally one which is diverse or mixed, requiring more skill on the part of the rhetor; in the nineteenth century it commonly referred to a mixed-gender audience, with a suggestion of impropriety on the part of women speakers addressing them (Zaeske). We follow Heather Lee Branstetter in reclaiming the term "promiscuity" for rhetoric; while she focuses on rhetorical scholarship—seeking to "intimately engage with and vicariously inhabit multiple perspectives" (18)—we here consider performance. From the vantage of media studies, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland also suggest the "inherent promiscuity of new media" environments, which depend on the sharing of data and which blur the lines between public and private (3). ([Return to text.](#))

6. As José van Dijck notes, of the top 100 social media platforms, only two are nonprofit: "the overwhelming majority...are run by corporations who think of the Internet as a marketplace first and a public forum second" (16, 178*n*14). ([Return to text.](#))

7. Independent of boyd, Brooke also deploys the term "persistence"; while boyd considers how content persists and resurfaces in online contexts, Brooke considers cognition, in particular how new media technologies and practices challenge the conceptualization of memory as "the individual, mental storage of information" (146). ([Return to text.](#))

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